



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: The Heart of the Story: Tough Love in Marriage – Part 3

Guest(s): Tracey and Mark Russell

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- Dr. Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.
- Roger Marsh: Hello everyone, I'm Roger Marsh, and this is Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. All month long we are replaying our most listened to programs from the past year! Here's another broadcast that topped the charts for us from 2020.
- Roger Marsh: In the beginning, God created marriage to reflect his desired relationship with us. For that reason, of course, Satan works tirelessly to destroy the sacred institution. On today's edition of family talk, Dr. James Dobson concludes his three-part conversation with author and speaker Tracey Russell. Now, over the past couple of programs, Tracey has talked about the profound impact that Dr. Dobson's book *Love Must Be Tough* had on her life. She explained how this work saved her marriage with her husband Mark, and in just a moment, Tracey and Mark Russell will continue to unpack how God healed their crumbling marriage. Mark will also elaborate on what he was thinking and feeling during those tough early years of his marriage, especially on his way to the honeymoon. Well there's a lot of content to get to. So let's get started. We'll begin with Tracey sharing the divine circumstances that began reconciling her marriage. Let's listen in right now.
- Tracey Russell: I was really struggling with truth and lies. And the woman that was mentoring me at the time, she said, "Tracey, I'm calling you to call off every single dating relationship you're in and I want you to start praying that God will show you the truth and lies." Because I was asking her, "I don't know, maybe he's genuine, maybe he's legitimate. I don't know. Is God restoring my marriage? I'm not sure." And she said, "Pray." And so that night Mark came over, I was going down to a wedding, Mark came over, and he opened his wallet to give me his alimony check. And inside there, Dr. Dobson was a picture of us from our wedding day.
- Dr. Dobson: He was carrying it?

Tracey Russell: He was carrying it. He wouldn't get rid of it. And I looked at him and I said, "Hey, you need to get rid of the wedding picture of us and give me my money." And so he handed me the alimony check and I said, "Where are you going?" And he said, "Well, I'm going to this thing called Promise Keepers in Washington DC."

Dr. Dobson: Oh my goodness.

Tracey Russell: I said, "Promise Keepers?" And I said, "Well, have fun at promise breakers. And I will talk to you later," because at this point I was really struggling with a lot of bitterness. So, he left the next day to go to Promise Keepers and I drove to a wedding. Well, I was in the center of Florida and I couldn't get any stations on the radio, but I started getting this one Christian station and I was listening to this beautiful praise music and my heart just started opening up so much. And the man talking said, "Some of you have been through some really tough times," and he quoted the verse from Revelation; "I see your good deeds and I know your good works, but this I hold against you. You've turned your back on your first love." And I just started bawling because I realized here I was trying to find this man to love me. I thought my first love had let me down - that was Mark - but my first love was always meant to be God and he never let me down. He was always there with me.

And so I immediately repented on the spot and said, "God, forgive me," with that, the announcer broke in said, "We're broadcasting live from Promise Keepers and now we're going to go to marriage reconciliation." So the broadcast that I was listening to was where Mark was thousands of miles away, and here I am in the middle of Florida and now they said, "Men, get on your knees because today is the day God's going to make you the husband and the father you were meant to be. Open up your wallet. Take out a picture of your wife, hold it up to God and repent because you are going to be that man. You're going to go back to your family." I'll never forget Tony Evans. [crosstalk 00:03:36]-

Dr. Dobson: The Lord was working on the other end of the line.

Tracey Russell: Yes. Yes. He said, "Go back to be that man, you're not down, get up like Rocky. Get back up on the ring, go back because our world is built by its families and be the head of that household. Love that wife. Love your children. Go back and do it God's way. Tell him you are sorry." And just as we pulled into the wedding, the radio station changed. And I thought, there's no way that just happened because I'd been praying for the truth and the lies. And the next day Mark called me and said, "Tracy," he said, "I've always wondered why I carried a picture of you in my wallet. And tonight I want to tell you why." And I said, "Oh my goodness, I know exactly why." And so that night when I drove home and he drove home, he got down on his knees by my bed and he looked in my eyes and I saw the lights on again. I saw the beautiful crystal blue lights, and he said, "I am so sorry." He said, "I was not the father I was meant to be. I was not the husband. I didn't love you the way you deserve to be loved, but God has remade me and He's changed my heart. And I'm not asking you to trust me. I'm asking

you to trust Christ in me and will you marry me again and let's do this God's way?"

And I saw the lights go back on. And as much as the fear was still in my heart, I knew that my first love in heaven was calling me to remarry this man that was kneeling in front of me. And so I said yes. And my uncle that married us the first time married us again in the middle of the night. No big guests. I even called my mom and said, "Mom, would you guys like to come?" And she said, "It's a little soon for us." My uncle said on that day that that was the best marriage he had ever facilitated. And he said it was absolutely amazing that Mark came around. But he said the greater miracle was that the Lord healed me from unforgiveness and bitterness. And so that night we were remarried and no one really knew about it. No one's really ever seen the picture except you now, today.

Dr. Dobson: You gave it to me.

Tracey Russell: I gave it to you because I wanted you to have it. And who would've thought that that marriage, that was just before the Lord, just for an audience of one, would be the one that would last 23 years. And the next day after that we went to church together with our son for the first time as husband and wife and haven't stopped going.

Dr. Dobson: That brings tears to my eyes.

Tracey Russell: And so all of our marriage, all of the blessings of our life came out of learning tough love and learning that it's worth it. Hashtag, worth it. Tough love is worth it, to stick it out, wait for God to work, and He truly is the God of the impossible.

Dr. Dobson: Mark, you've been in the background here and I want you to move to this microphone. You're the other half of the story and it's a love story, isn't it? It's a story of pain and anger and separation, but it's also a story of love. Tell us what you were going through during this time.

Mark Russell: I had some struggles in college, lust, pride was the main root of things. I had never put God really on the throne of my life, let Him drive things for me. It was always about me, whether it was in athletics, whether it was my social environment at college, the engineering degree that I was achieving in college, everything was about me. I believe that I knew the Lord. I believe that I had accepted Christ as my savior, but I never trusted Him as my Lord.

Dr. Dobson: There is a difference.

Mark Russell: And there's a huge difference in that. And just all these struggles and insecurities that I had in college that I'd never dealt with, I carried into my marriage and it's like a light switch. Truly the evening when we were driving away from the wedding reception out on [inaudible 00:07:35]. So we were driving back to the hotel and I can actually remember the moment on a bridge

where this feeling came over me. And I can tell you for two years of my life I walked around in that same fog feeling trapped and trying to figure out “how do I get out of this trap? How do I get my freedom back? How do I get this life that I so love and I've enjoyed for the past number of years back?” And the fact is the more I tried to move away from our marriage, the worse it got.

Dr. Dobson: You heard me describe what happens when the person that's being rejected grabs and holds and cries and pleads and begs and essentially puts a cage around you. Do you understand what I was talking about there?

Mark Russell: Absolutely.

Dr. Dobson: That drove you away.

Mark Russell: It did.

Dr. Dobson: It's what I've taught. If you look in the book, there's a little drawing. Fortunately, I didn't draw it an artist did, but it's two hands with the index fingers up and they are side by side. That's the way they intended marriage to be and the way it was in the beginning for most people. And then as the person that is beginning to get cold feet begins to move away, you move the right hand to the right and what that makes the other person represented by the left hand do is chase, come after, grab, hold, and that makes a person even more anxious to get away. It destroys marriage. I wish I could get that across to everybody. I'm telling you in a dating relationship, you start to do that and the relationship is over, where one person knows that she is losing the guy and she starts to panic.

Sometimes she will drive her car over to his house and sit in the dark and watch and see who comes – when she starts doing that kind of thing, you want out, you want to get away. It does not draw people together. You marry somebody because they want you, not because you forced them to marry you. You want what you can't have. You don't want what you're stuck with. In crass terms, that's what's going on. And when women especially understand that process, it's like a light bulb going on and I'm grateful Tracey for your saying, tell me what you're thinking right now.

Tracey Russell: Well, I just wanted you to hear what I want - because I have so many women that call me and ask me, well, what does it really look like when someone does start turning around?

Mark Russell: Well, this was truly after – Tracey's speaking about after I'd attended that Bible study and I heard for the first time in my life, someone being truly transparent with me, not just about their successes but about their failures. And I so related to that testimony that morning and that's really where I felt God just speak into my life and into the things that I was doing, saying you can overcome this.

Dr. Dobson: Thank God for Promise Keepers. They ministered in this way, not only to you, but to tens of thousands of men who went home and did the right thing.

Mark Russell: Yeah. Throughout the course of time I thought I was seeking happiness and I can tell you I was becoming more and more miserable. The more I distance myself from my marriage I was really distancing myself from God and I believe that God was really working in my life in a huge way to where I reached a breaking point. I do remember the night that Tracey sat at the door and read that letter to me and I looked at that as "Wow, this is an out. Awesome. I don't have the courage to walk away. Now I can say, 'Hey, Tracey doesn't want me to live with her anymore. Now some of the blame shift is going in her direction,'" and I truly ran with that for a while and became more and more miserable. I can tell you that was a huge turning point in my life because that created crisis in my life. Everything until then was comfortable. We lived in the same house. I wasn't tight financially, I wasn't giving her alimony checks. I truly couch surfed for a while until my friends eventually said, "We're done. You can't live on us anymore. Go find your own place to stay."

I got my own place to stay and I had nothing there. Once again, God was bringing me to my knees. And during this process a friend did invite me to that Bible study. And through the transparency of this person, God did speak into my life. But I realized that morning that this man had different struggles than I did, but he had struggles and he was willing to admit them. And he talked about his path to success, which was through Christ and through his relationship with Christ, and that he wasn't perfect even that day, he's still struggling with things, but Christ is leading him in the right direction. I so desired that at this point, because I realized that morning that truly God was the only way and Christ, and a life with Christ, could take that mountain of sin and just wash it away. And it did for this guy. And I was like, "I'm willing to try. God, give me a chance here."

And I'll tell you as soon as I truly said, "God, I can't do it. I'm broken. I have nothing. I mean, according to the world's standards right now, I am a failure. I'm divorced, I've got a son, I live in an apartment. My parents put food in my fridge just to help me make ends meet. I have nothing right now." At that point is when men started to come around me from that Bible study, hold me accountable to things. Walk me through things. Really the accountability that these men and just the study pouring into my life. I sat and I read the Bible cover to cover for my first time and just really started saying, "God, I need you." And I was broken. But I'll tell you, with all those things said and being divorced and having a son, living really paycheck to paycheck and my parents helping me out. I had more peace in my life in that apartment alone, sitting in a lawn chair in the living room with my guitar and a bed on the floor in the bedroom, which is all I had, than any part of my life before. And I had a Bible.

I was so focused on God and just learning more about how to have a relationship with Him. I was being taught by these men how to have that relationship, held accountable in that process.

Dr. Dobson: You know what's amazing about your story? Is that the God of heaven who created all that there is. Everything was created by Him. He knows everything. He has every answer to every problem. And that God cared about you and about Tracey and was watching what was going on. Why would He care? That's the biggest question I want to ask the Lord someday. "Why did you care about me? What was there? I had nothing to give you. I had nothing to merit your love," and yet He looked out to you. He heard your prayers Tracey, you were praying at the same time, weren't you?

Tracey Russell: Oh yes. And you asked me earlier, why do you think that happened? And I honestly believe that God was entrusting me with the salvation of my husband and for us to have the Christian family and the Christian home and that life we've lived in service for Him.

Dr. Dobson: What a love story. What a love story. This is phenomenal.

Tracey Russell: So, little did I know that this guy would be the one praying over me at night and little did I know he would be the one starting Celebrate Recovery at our church. And little did I know that he would be the one that my kids look to to pray for them.

Dr. Dobson: Be a great father.

Tracey Russell: He's read the Bible cover to cover with every one of my children.

Mark Russell: When you asked Tracey earlier, "What would you say to women?" What I'd say to men is we're not alone. Any man that I've met that says I don't struggle with lust, I say, "You need to look yourself in the mirror."

Dr. Dobson: It's universal.

Mark Russell: It's universal. People that say that they don't have struggles, hurts, habits, hang-ups in their lives. I look at them and say, "You're not being truthful with me." I just think that men need to be more real with one another and not just hop out of their car at church, put on their smiling face. But the discussions that I love with men are when we get deep, okay, when we really dig into our lives and how we can help each other out. I tell my friends, if you're not pouring into me, if you see something that I'm doing wrong with my kids, with my wife, with you as a friend, or if I'm not spending enough time with God, challenge me on it. Because if you don't challenge me on things that I don't see, because I've gone through periods in my life where I didn't see and it led to disaster. If you don't challenge me on these things, then I don't consider you a friend. I look at pouring into others as truly being honest with each other and transparent toward one another.

Tracey Russell: I just want to say that I've been so honored to be Mark's wife for the last 23 years because there's a total difference between a man who puts accountability

in his life. A man who puts incredible boundaries. I've seen him really be a husband and a father. I can't even imagine.

Dr. Dobson: And walk the talk.

Tracey Russell: I've seen him... He is a man that doesn't come home and sit. He does the dishes. He can out clean me in our house. I mean he is a man that is-

Dr. Dobson: Well, we're getting carried away here.

Tracey Russell: No, it's true. That's the truth. He is a man who is such a hard worker and just that I have the utmost respect for to call my husband. A godly man in this world is a gift and I'm so grateful. I'm so grateful for second chances and thirds and fourths and God gives them. Every blessing of my life came out of that decision of tough love, every single one.

Mark Russell: That's wonderful. I believe that since Tracey and I have been remarried, truly in Christ, things have not been perfect.

Dr. Dobson: They never are.

Mark Russell: I still have struggles. Tracey still has struggles. But I'll tell you, they've been sweet. They've been blessed, they've been awesome. We've gone through some struggles with regard to our family, with regard to our kids, with regard to deaths within the family. I don't believe that a life in Christ lets you off the hook of those things. Everything isn't going to be peaches and cream, but it has been very peaceful, much more peaceful than that time. God has given Tracey and I the opportunity to speak into other marriages as well. I don't believe that there's anything in God's economy that will be used for waste. And that the struggles that I've had, maybe I can relate to other men, maybe I can't, and maybe they can relate to me and maybe they can't, but we're all on the same playing field.

When you really let God work in your life, then you can truly speak into others' lives. And that gives me no greater joy than to see other marriages starting to thrive or turn the corner where I can sit down and say, "Man, I felt that," or "I haven't felt that." But you know what? You can get through it. I got through it. I had a mountain of sin in my life and God's grace and Christ Jesus washed it completely away. And that's powerful.

Dr. Dobson: Is there any thrill for you greater than leading someone to Christ?

Mark Russell: No, there isn't. There's no more joy in my life than leading someone to Christ and really giving to others, which is interesting because it's the contrast of the life that I truly lived earlier, which was about me. It was about pride. But whether it's leading people to Christ or just showing people Christ's love through me. We're here, we're vessels, we're reflectors of Christ's love, whether

it's your neighbors, whether it's my wife, my kids, people that we work with in Africa and South America doing some missions work and stuff, there's no greater joy that I get when I see an area that I can help bring someone up, in their marriage or anything, that gives me a lot of joy these days. And it's truly, totally opposite of the way that I used to live.

Tracey Russell: I would say you are very characterized by generosity.

Mark Russell: I realized that through my struggles, I had a wake of destruction that I left behind, not just with Tracey but with other people, with my parents, with her family, cousins, relatives, I mean, you name it, friends. I burnt bridges down and there was a cost and God did turn my life around and I'm so thankful for that and I'm so thankful that he brought me to my knees through this experience because I don't know where I'd be today without that experience in my life. With that said, I look at our marriage and the restoration of our marriage, and I think - people are like, "That's a miracle Mark, that God worked in your life in that way and turned your life around that way." And I like to say that the true miracle is the forgiveness that Christ gave my wife because after the things that I had done to her and ruined her dreams and been unfaithful to her and just been so prideful and going out, living a single life during the first two years of our marriage, to be able to forgive me for that.

And truly, 23 years later, I look back and there's not one time in those 23 years that Tracey has ever thrown that in my face. We talk about things like it's another person because I've been born again in Christ, but she's never thrown it in my face. She's been so supportive throughout the years. But I think that that's a Christlike forgiveness. So many times we get into situations where one person wants to reclaim the marriage and the other person doesn't, but I really believe it takes two lives that are fully committed to Christ to turn crisis situations around.

Dr. Dobson: Tracey, those were sweet words that you just heard, weren't they?

Tracey Russell: Yes, it was really sweet.

Dr. Dobson: And there was a time in your life when you thought you'd never hear them.

Tracey Russell: True. It is overwhelming to me to hear those beautiful words from my husband and to hear that truly Christ gave me that forgiveness. He gave me that gift of forgiveness.

Dr. Dobson: My prayer is that there are many people who have listened to these broadcasts, will say, "That's where I am. That's where I need to go, and the Lord hears and answers prayer and I'm going to follow that path." There is hope here.

Tracey Russell: Yes.

Dr. Dobson: You've brought hope to a lot of people in these three days.

Tracey Russell: So we've been praying for over 100,000 marriages to be saved through this broadcast. My son always tells me, "Mom, if the number's not big enough and doesn't scare you enough, it's not God sized enough." So we were praying on the way over here, "100,000 marriages saved, God, that we're just praying that thousands of marriages will be saved and there will be many, many restorations."

Dr. Dobson: Well, He's been in this studio I know that. Thank the two of you for coming, you flew all the way from California.

Tracey Russell: Thank you so much.

Dr. Dobson: It has been such a pleasure to have you here, and we'll meet again.

Tracey Russell: I hope so.

Mark Russell: I hope so too. Thank you.

Tracey Russell: Thank you so much.

Dr. Dobson: God be with you.

Tracey Russell: You too.

Roger Marsh: Well, we pray that you have been blessed by hearing the Russell's testimony these past three days here on Family Talk. Their marriage is a beautiful picture of the renewing and the restoring power of God's love. Tracey Russell has provided us with unique and applicable content which speaks directly to struggling marriages. For additional information on any of our guests this month, by the way, simply go to our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org. Thanks so much for listening, and be sure to join us again next time for another edition of Family Talk's Best of Broadcast.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

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