



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Preparing for Adulthood: Love Must Be Tough – Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. James Dobson

Air Date: October 13, 2026

- Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute, supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson, and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.
- Roger Marsh: You know, some of the most painful moments in a relationship come when one person begins to pull away. The natural instinct may be to hold on even tighter, to pursue harder, or to do whatever it takes to keep that person from leaving. But sometimes those very reactions can actually drive someone even further away faster. On today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, we're going to hear a message Dr. Dobson originally presented to an audience of young adults preparing for some of life's biggest decisions, including love, dating, and marriage. And while the culture has certainly changed since then, the emotions surrounding these relationships have not changed nearly as much. I'm Roger Marsh. Welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. And during the next half hour, you're going to hear Dr. Dobson explain why respect, dignity, and freedom are essential to a healthy romantic relationship, and also why desperation and insecurity can slowly undermine the very love someone is trying to preserve. But before teaching those principles, Dr. Dobson's going to take us back to his own college years and his relationship with his wife, Shirley. Now, believe it or not, there once was a time when Dr. Dobson wasn't really convinced that she was the woman he would marry. So one night, sitting outside her dorm room, he decided to end their relationship. But what Shirley did next caught him completely off guard, and Dr. Dobson says her response changed everything that followed. Here now is Dr. James Dobson with lessons from his timeless book, *Love Must Be Tough*, on today's edition of Family Talk.
- Dr. James Dobson: I want to talk to you today about romantic relationships and about principles of marriage, good marriage. And that is highly relevant to you guys, of course, because the chances are very great. Within five to seven years, most of you will be married. And I want to talk a little bit about what goes into a good marriage. Some of it will be autobiographical because it will relate to my marriage to Shirley. I'm very blessed, and you've already met her, and you know that. She's a great lady. Have a very good marriage. Not a perfect marriage. Not perfect, because Shirley's not perfect. But anyway, we have had a great relationship and a great marriage. We do have a little tiff every now and then. A little conflict every once in a while, because nobody gets away without that. And we've had our share of it through the years. We had a little fight right here in Colorado a

few years ago. We had gone skiing in Vail together. And we'd spent about six or seven days together, day and night. And we had a little bit too much togetherness. You know what that means? It's when you've just about worn each other's nerves out. The healthy relationship is one that breathes. Like this. You move out a little bit, and then you come back together. And you move out, and you come back together. And we'd been together a little too long. We were starting to get on each other's nerves. And we'd had a great time, but it was time to go home. And so we got up in the morning. We had to catch a plane in Denver, and we were in a big hurry. And we threw the stuff in the car, and we had a couple of little arguments in the process of doing that. And we headed down the highway, and we got to Stapleton Airport here in Denver. Bad snowstorm. I mean, the wind was blowing and it was cold. Shirley doesn't like the cold. And I pulled the car up there. It was a rental car and I had to turn it in. So I pulled it up there to take the stuff out. I mean, we were just going to barely make that plane. And my sweet wife, you know, instead of helping me get all that stuff out of the car, gets out, goes in the airport and stands looking at me through the window. And I'm getting this stuff out, and there's two sets of skis and two sets of poles and three suitcases and four parkas and all that stuff. And the more I thought about that, the madder I got about it.

Now, it was an immature response on my part, but here she is in the warm building, and I'm out there, and we're late, and I'm trying to carry all this stuff, and I couldn't wait to tell her how I felt about that. So finally I got all the stuff out, and then I started taking it in. I carried it in, and I'm demonstrating to her how I felt, and I'd set it down at her feet, and I'd go back and get another load. And I was just waiting for the opportunity to really express myself. Finally got it all in there, and I walked into the airport, and I sucked in a big breath of air to tell Shirley how I felt about her not helping me when we were late and everything. And before I could say a word, at that precise moment, I heard a cheery little voice behind me. And I turned around and there was a man there and had his hand stuck out to me like this. And he said, "Dr. Dobson, I want to meet the man who's taught me how to really love my wife." I never choked it down so much in my life. I said, "I'd like you to meet my bride here."

So I do have to be kind of careful these days. I can't even get mad in public anymore or even irritated. But there are those moments. Now, not very many, for Shirley and me. We've come to the point that those power plays that you have in early days of marriage, which are very typical, are essentially over. And we go weeks and months without having a real disagreement or a real argument. But I do have to tell you, we started out on a pretty bumpy trail back many years ago. We met when we were in college. I was a senior at the time, and Shirley was a sophomore. I was a big, lofty senior. I was a big man on campus, and she was a new kid on the block. And she will tell you today, and it's true, it's no insult, it's true, that she cared more about the relationship in those early days than I did. I had other things on my mind. I was heading to graduate school, and I had all this senior activity and everything, and I felt like a big shot. And I didn't really care a whole lot whether the relationship was surely

developed or not. And I held that relationship very lightly, primarily because there was not a great challenge there.

In other words, I knew Shirley liked me. I knew she might even love me as we went on a little bit. And for that reason, I held it loosely. And Shirley was always too proud to pursue me, but she was the one. You know, there are ways of communicating who cares. Well, it came down to my graduation. And I got pulled into the Army. And so the night before I left for the Army, those were the days, guys, when you served, whether you wanted to or not. And I got classified 1A. So I was off to Fort Ord, California to go to the Army. And I went up there, and then I came back after about three months, and I felt I just really needed to cut Shirley loose. I felt that I was going to tie her up, and I didn't think I was going to marry her. I didn't think I loved her, and I liked her a lot, and we had a good time together, but I just didn't think it was going to work, and I didn't think it was fair for me to be off there in the Army and her to wait for me.

So we had a great time. It was New Year's Eve. Had a great time together. We came back, and we were sitting out in the car in front of her dorm, and I broke the news. And I said, "Shirley, you know, I really care about you a lot. We've had two years of great fun here, and we've just built a relationship and everything, but I think it's only fair to tell you that I don't think I'm going to marry you, and I think that we better date somebody else." You know what that means, right? That's cutting the cord. Shirley handled that in such a beautiful way that I tell you, if she had not been so wise in the way she responded at that moment, we would not be married today. Everything was on the line at that moment. And she said to me, "Well, you know, Jim, I've been thinking the same thing." She said, "There are other guys that I want to date. And, you know, you're gone. And I think it's probably wise. Why don't we just do that?" And I was shocked, really. I thought she's going to hang on me, you know. And I thought she was going to say, you know, can't we work something out? And will you write me and all that stuff? She just accepted it. And I went around, opened the door, and I walked her to the dorm. I said, "Can I kiss you goodbye?" And she said, "No, I don't think so." And she went in the dorm and cried all night. But I never knew that. If I had known that, it would have been over. She let me go with such poise and such respect and such dignity that the whole relationship changed. And instead of me saying, how can I get away? I began asking myself, do I really want to go? Which is a very different question.

So I went on through the Army. I came back, and I went into graduate school at USC. By this time, Shirley's a big woman on campus, and I'm a forgotten has-been. And Shirley begins to look very good to me. By that time, she was the senior class president, and she was homecoming queen, and she was doing all this stuff, and boy, she was really in the thick of it. And there were guys all around, and she was off to this party and that and doing all kinds of stuff. And I began to want her a whole lot. And so what I began to do was play the role she had played when I was a senior and she was a sophomore. So I'm calling her on the phone, and I'm saying, "Did you go to the senior class party last night? And who'd you go with? And who was there? And who walked you home? And why

weren't you there when I called? And you didn't return my call.” And yes, I was chasing her and I was beginning to take the challenge away from her. And I was beginning to be the one that was conveying to her that I needed her a whole lot and probably more than she needed me. And I'm telling you, she was just walking away from me. I was losing her. Day by day. And the more I lost her, the more desperately I wanted her. And that made me reach for her more. So I got to thinking about that. And I pulled off someplace for a couple of hours, sat at a desk, and I thought that whole thing over. And for two hours, I analyzed what had gone wrong. I had that woman eating out of my hand. She was wrapped around my little finger. And now you know, she didn't seem to want to give me the time of day. And folks, it hit me. I'd been praying about it. I think the Lord told me. I saw that I was behaving in ways that were disrespectful to me. I was starting to grovel a little bit. I was starting to chase her. I was starting to remove the challenge. And I was treating myself with disrespect. And just like turning on a light bulb, I saw what was turning her off.

So I sat down and made myself a little list. And I listed 10 things that were going to be different. And I said, I'm going to be independent and secure and confident. And I'm going to do all this stuff. Especially, I'm going to convey to Shirley one way or another that I'm going someplace in life, and if she wants to go with me, I'd love to have her make the trip, but if she doesn't want to go, somebody else will. And so I was just going to be very secure and very independent. We had a date on Valentine's Day about two days later, and it was the first time that I tried out my new 10-point philosophy. Worked like a charm. I mean, you can't believe. All night long, you know, I was not rude. I didn't argue or anything. But I was just sort of in my own world and just sort of confident and just I wasn't reaching for Shirley like I had been. And on the way home from the restaurant, took her out to a nice restaurant. On the way home, we were driving along. She was sitting next to her door over here, and I was sitting next to this one. We weren't talking very much. All of a sudden, she comes scooting across the seat right up next to me, and she said, “Will you pull over and stop?” I was glad to do that. I pulled over and stopped, and it was bright moonlight that night. And she said, “I'm afraid I'm losing you, and I don't know why.” I said, Well, you know, I gave her a little speech. I said, “You know, I'm going somewhere in life, and I hope you choose to go with me.” And we were married several months later. Those were two key moments in our relationship. One where I put the test on the relationship and she passed it. And the second one is where I played the right role with her and I passed the test. And that brought us together.

Now, I learned something from that that I have also seen demonstrated with other people earlier in life. but also, folks, in 500 counseling situations that have come from it. That simple concept is the basis for a book that I wrote called *Love Must Be Tough*. It has now sold 800,000 copies in hardback. I get letters on this book nearly every day from people who understand some principles of romantic relationships growing out of what I just told you that they didn't understand before. The main thing is this. Well, let me put it on the board.

Respect is the fundamental ingredient in romantic relationships. Respect precedes love. And you cannot build respect when you are treating yourself disrespectfully, when you're grabbing and holding another person. Now, listen carefully, because this is a principle. If you understand, it will play a role from this point on the rest of your life. But I do tell you it's hard to grasp. It's hard to get a hold of. It took a whole book for me to explain it. Respect is the fundamental ingredient. Because you want in romantic relationships essentially what you can't have. You don't want what you're stuck with. You don't want someone who grabs, who builds a cage around you. and who begs and pleads and cringes in fear, who grovels. You know what the word groveling means? It means to get down in the dirt and crawl. Now see, when one person is highly attracted to another, and it's not mutual, the natural tendency is to grab. It's to plead. It's to beg. It's what Shirley would have done wrong if in the car at that time she'd said, "You're my whole life. I love you. I don't love anybody else but you. You can't do this to me. You can't leave me. If you do this, what will I do?" And to cry and to come hold me. If she'd have done that, see, she would have built a cage around me. And love must be free. You cannot build a love relationship out of an obligatory kind of situation where you can't get away, where you're trapped, where you're held together.

Romantic love requires a certain respect and a certain freedom. When you grab and hold another person, you take the little spark that's there and you snuff it out. And when you behave in ways that are not respectful, you destroy what was a romantic relationship. I heard of a man who was desperate to marry a woman that he loved and she wouldn't have anything to do with him, so he decided to start writing her letters. And over a two-year period, he wrote her 700 letters and she married the postman. It works that way. The harder you try, the more you reach, the more the other person is driven away.

Before Shirley and I developed a relationship, she told me about a friend that she had in high school named Stanley. And Stanley was a guy with a lot of needs. And Shirley decided that she really didn't want to go with Stanley anymore. And so she was going to cut him free. And they had a similar moment like we had in the car out in front of the dorm where he's riding along in his chopped down Chevy and with the Angora dice hanging from the rearview mirror. In those days, they had these dice that the guys hung from the mirror. And so they went out and parked someplace, and she told Stanley that she was through and that she wasn't going to be able to go out with him anymore. Stanley slinks down in the seat, and he doesn't say anything for about five minutes. He's obviously very upset. And he gets out of the car and takes off, leaves. Shirley doesn't know where he's going, didn't say anything. Stanley's gone. She's sitting there in the dark about 15 minutes. Finally, Stanley came back with a handkerchief around his hand. It was all bloody. Stanley had gone out there someplace and hit a tree. Just socked the tree. Folks, did that draw her towards Stanley? Did that make her want to continue the relationship? I mean, who wants to go with a guy who gets frustrated and socks trees, you know? See, Stanley was disrespectful to himself. Instead of letting her go and allowing that little spark to grow, he tried desperately to hold her. And he

snuffed out the flame. And it works that way. The challenge is important. And respect is important. And again, the respect for yourself is extremely important. Not talking about pride. I'm just talking about dignity. That's a better word. Dignity. You can only marry one person in a lifetime. At least that's the way it's intended. And you don't marry somebody who is demanding that you marry them. Or you don't continue with them. You do that because you want to. So love must be free. It's sort of like a little yellow bird. If you hold it too tightly, it will die. If you hold it too loosely, it will fly away. And those that succeed in relationships between men and women are those that learn how to hold the bird.

Now, this is the point that I would like you to understand, and I don't think many marital couples, many people who are married fully understand this. Getting married does not change this relationship. It is still the same. Even in marriage, there must be a certain dignity there must be a certain respect. Respect begins to die usually in one person and confidence begins to die in the other. All right, let me give you an example. You got Jack and he's thinking about his wife. He didn't say this. This is not the kind of thing you say to anybody. He says about his wife to himself. He says, "You know, I used to think she was pretty. Not pretty anymore. She gained 15 pounds after the babies came. She just never looked right again. I'm embarrassed. She's dowdy. I take her to the office. I really don't want the guys at the office to meet her. You know, and this house is disorganized. I don't think she's really very bright either." Start thinking those kind of thoughts. Or Joan may be thinking about Jack. "Look at him lying there on the couch asleep with his mouth open. Just look at him. The guy's going nowhere and he's taking me with him. You know, he's got no future. He doesn't care. There's no romantic aspect to our relationship and I am stuck with this man for the rest of my life." There's a key point. Marriages begin to disintegrate when one party usually begins to feel trapped.

Roger Marsh:

Love can be one of life's greatest gifts. But as Dr. James Dobson reminded us today here on Family Talk, a healthy relationship cannot be built on fear, desperation, or the need to control another person. Lasting love needs respect, dignity, and the freedom to choose one another. You're listening to Family Talk and a special presentation featuring our own Dr. James Dobson. And if today's program spoke to something happening in your life or the life of someone you love, I encourage you to listen again or to share it with them. You'll find today's broadcast along with additional marriage and relationship resources when you visit drjamesdobson.org.

You know, Dr. Dobson shared something particularly personal on today's program, and that is the story of his early relationship with his wife, Shirley. And of course, the Dobsons were married nearly 65 years before Dr. Dobson went home to be with the Lord in August of 2025. At one point during their courtship, Dr. Dobson was prepared to walk away. But instead of desperately trying to hold on to him, Shirley responded with dignity and allowed him to go. Dr. Dobson says that moment changed the direction of their relationship forever, and that experience eventually helped shape a principle that he would teach for

decades, and that respect is fundamental to romantic relationships. Now, Dr. Dobson wrote down these lessons in a timeless book called *Love Must Be Tough*, and we've adapted them into a five-day email series that's designed to help you take this wisdom to heart. The principles we heard today reach far beyond dating. They speak to the way husbands and wives relate to one another and to anyone trying to understand what makes a relationship strong and healthy. You can sign up for the free five-day email series called "Love Must Be Tough" when you go to drjamesdobson.org. You'll also find that same material at jdfi.org as well. Helping marriages and families thrive according to biblical principles is at the heart of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Through broadcasts like Family Talk, along with articles, videos, podcasts, and other resources, we want to provide practical biblical encouragement for every season of family life. And we're able to continue that mission because of listeners like you choose to stand with us. Your tax-deductible gift helps us. marriages, equip parents, and encourage families with biblical truth. And you can make a donation when you call a member of our ministry's constituent care team. That number is 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825. You can also write to us. Our ministry mailing address is the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, P.O. Box 39000, Colorado Springs, Colorado, the zip code 80949. Once again, our ministry mailing address is the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, or just use those initials, JDFI for short, P.O. Box 39000, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 80949.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thanks so much for joining us today. Be sure to tune in again next time right here as Dr. Dobson will continue this important conversation about love, respect, and building relationships that last. "Preparing for Adulthood: Love Must Be Tough," will once again be our theme on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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

This is Roger Marsh. Since 2010 the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute and has been standing firm on these three pillars: faith, family, and freedom. We believe these foundations are essential for society to thrive and families to flourish. Every day here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, we reach millions of listeners through the airwaves and online with biblical truth and practical guidelines. Your partnership makes it possible to continue this important work in a culture that opposes Christian values. So from all of us here at the JDFI, thanks so much for your prayers and your continued support.