



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage – Part 1

Guest(s): Lee and Leslie Strobel

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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: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. You ever wonder what it means to be unequally yoked in marriage? The phrase originally described a pair of animals that simply couldn't pull a plow together. One weaker, or maybe one unwilling to follow the farmer's lead. Well, today, it speaks to the strain that comes when two people in a marriage are not walking the same spiritual path. And many couples quietly wrestle with this very struggle. That's why on today's edition of Family Talk, you'll hear a conversation Dr. Dobson shared with Lee and Leslie Strobel. They're the authors of the book *Surviving a Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage*. Now, Lee Strobel, of course, is an award-winning journalist and a leading Christian apologist. But there was a season in life where Leslie was walking with the Lord and Lee was not. Together, the Strobels will open up about the conflict that arose when Leslie did come to faith, and Lee was spending most of his time trying to challenge her faith to get her away from this so-called cult, as he put it. Let's join the conversation right now on today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, Lee and Leslie. I have highest respect for you and what you do.

Lee Strobel: Same with me toward you.

Dr. James Dobson: One of the nation's best apologists of the Christian faith. And you do it in such a way that's captivating and winning to people. So I'm thankful for the way the Lord is using you. And it's such an honor, Leslie, to have you here.

Leslie Strobel: Thank you so much.

Dr. James Dobson: I met you for the first time today. But it's extremely appropriate that you're here today because of the topic that we're here to talk about.

Leslie Strobel: Thank you. We're grateful to be here.

Dr. James Dobson: You're a grandmother of two.

Leslie Strobel: Two and one on the way.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh, my. That's not fair.

Leslie Strobel: It's wonderful.

Dr. James Dobson: And you guys are our neighbors.

Lee Strobel: We are. We moved to Colorado, to Castle Rock, which is just between Denver and Colorado Springs, because my daughter and her husband and our grandchildren moved there, and we wanted to be in the same neighborhood. We wanted to be an influence in the lives of our grandchildren, and that was our motivation to be together. Fortunately, my son, who just got his Ph.D. in theology in Europe, has moved in with us temporarily while he waits for his position to open to teach theology. And his wife is pregnant, so we're going to have a baby in the house for the first time.

Leslie Strobel: It doesn't get any better than that.

Dr. James Dobson: A very pleasant time in your life.

Lee Strobel: I'm catching up on my sleep right now. I'm storing it up.

Dr. James Dobson: We moved here from Southern California as well in 1991. Now, this is a great place to live, isn't it?

Lee Strobel: It's fabulous.

Dr. James Dobson: It is particularly important that you be here because we're going to be talking about a very significant subject. Many years ago, an author named Jo Berry that we talked about in my office a few minutes ago had written an outstanding book called *Beloved Unbeliever*. I wouldn't be surprised if that book is still out there today.

Lee Strobel: I bet it is. It's a great book.

Dr. James Dobson: But I interviewed her in 1983, and she went on to Heaven shortly after. So Jo is gone, but Lee and Leslie have walked the same bumpy road that Jo and her husband walked. And you all have written a book on this subject. It's called *Surviving a Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage*. And it's autobiographical, isn't it?

Lee Strobel: It is.

Dr. James Dobson: It comes out of your early marital experience. And when you all were married, neither of you were believers.

Lee Strobel: That's right. I was an atheist, pretty hardcore nonbeliever. Leslie was more,

I call it spiritual neutral. She was friendly toward the idea of God but did not know God personally, was not a born-again Christian.

Dr. James Dobson: And where did you meet?

Lee Strobel: We met in high school. We happened to bump into each other. She was with a friend of mine. Bumped into each other, and she went home that day and told her, "Mom, I met the boy I'm going to marry."

Dr. James Dobson: That'll do it every time.

Lee Strobel: But then she was committed. She had to.

Dr. James Dobson: But neither of you grew up in a Christian home.

Lee Strobel: Well, my parents were Christians. They were members of a Lutheran church. They took me to church several times when I was younger. But they allowed me to decide what I wanted to follow. And I decided at a young age that God does not and cannot exist. and became a skeptic, which is my personality. My background is in journalism and law. So you can imagine you put those two things together, what kind of a skeptic you get. So I lived a life that was reflective of atheism. It was an immoral life. It was a drunken life. It was profane. It was narcissistic, self-centered, self-absorbed. I mean, that was who I was. Leslie was always the nice one.

Dr. James Dobson: Were your parents believers?

Lee Strobel: My mother was raised in Scotland. She was from Scotland and was a war bride, was raised in the Scottish Presbyterian Church. And my father didn't want anything to do with church. She didn't drive, so consequently she didn't go to church. She taught me about God. She used to sing hymns to me and read me Bible stories but I never really knew who Jesus was other than the baby in the manger. There was never any kind of personal relationship with Him.

Lee Strobel: You know, the good news about our dad was, though, he did come to faith. He got to pray with him to receive Christ just literally hours before he had a stroke that debilitated him, and he lingered and eventually died. So it was really the last cogent conversation of his life at age 89 that he received Christ. So thank God he's in Heaven today. But that was the world in which we came out.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. Since we're going to be talking today about your marriage and the relationship as it relates to the Christian faith. What was your early marriage like? Did you bond together? Did it work? Did you have problems?

Leslie Strobel: It worked well until I became a Christian.

Lee Strobel: That was the problem. We were pretty happy. I mean, yes, I would get drunk. I enjoyed getting drunk.

Leslie Strobel: He was a happy drunk.

Lee Strobel: I was a happy drunk. I was the friendliest guy in the bar. But our relationship was good, wasn't it?

Leslie Strobel: It was. It was very good. But it was upon my accepting Christ that the trouble started.

Dr. James Dobson: What kind of trouble?

Leslie Strobel: Well, he hadn't expected me to become a believer. And I hadn't expected to. I was in spiritual neutral, as Lee had mentioned. But we had just moved into a new apartment. And a neighbor came down with a plate of cookies and her little girl, who was about the age of our daughter. And Linda was a Christian. And we struck up a really close relationship. And over time, she led me to the Lord.

Lee Strobel: Which I thought was the worst possible thing that could happen. Honestly, when she told me, I'll never forget it. She said, "Lee, I made a big decision. I've decided to become a follower of Jesus." And the first word that went through my mind was divorce.

Dr. James Dobson: You're not serious.

Lee Strobel: The first word that went through my mind, I thought, I don't need this stuff. This is not what I signed up for. I don't need this. I don't want some holy roller for a wife. I don't want her putting curbs on my lifestyle. I don't want her looking down her nose at me when I get drunk. I don't want her dissing my friends because they're obnoxious people. That's what I thought was going to happen. And honestly, I remember I did something. This is how immature I was. I remember I was mowing the lawn later that day, and she had a beautiful flower garden and I just mowed down the whole flower garden.

Dr. James Dobson: You're kidding.

Lee Strobel: I did. I did.

Dr. James Dobson: Are you that kind of guy? Well, were you that kind of guy?

Lee Strobel: I was. Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, Leslie, you know, there are many things that happen in the Christian life where we're inclined to ask, what are you doing, Lord? Here you give your heart to Jesus, and the next thing you know, you're having marital problems.

Leslie Strobel: You're so right.

Dr. James Dobson: That doesn't make any sense but it was God's will for you guys.

Leslie Strobel: That's right. And I don't know how I would have gotten through it without the support of Linda, who was a tremendous godly woman, who wasn't just someone there to kind of help me gang up on Lee, but someone who was there to give me really wise, godly counsel on how to proceed and how to grow myself.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. Did you feel guilty or despondent because you were frustrating the man you loved?

Leslie Strobel: Over time, I felt guilty that he wasn't accepting Christ. I felt guilty that I wasn't somehow able to lead him to the Lord that I loved. And that's where the guilt came from, not so much my having become a believer.

Dr. James Dobson: Were you nagging him a lot?

Leslie Strobel: I did go through a point of doing that. I'd leave tracks out or little books with underlined things for him to read, hopefully. And he would just close them and put them aside. Eventually, Linda really counseled me well on that and said, "You know, God doesn't need your help in trying to win Lee to the Lord. That's between God and Lee."

Dr. James Dobson: Did that turn you off, Lee?

Lee Strobel: It did initially, yeah. She would do those little things. She'd leave a book open with highlighted passages that she wanted me to read. It made me mad. It frustrated me. But I overlooked it because there were a lot of emotions going on at the time. She was feeling bad because is there something wrong with me as a Christian that I can't lead my husband to Christ? Well, she was taking an unfair burden upon herself that she really shouldn't have. I was feeling all kinds of emotions because what was happening over time is it was almost as if her life were a mirror. And as she became more godly, as she lived a life of purity, as she pursued God in an authentic and transparent and honest way and grew in her faith, it was like she was holding a mirror up to me and it was accentuating my sinfulness and my cynicism. And just the corrosion of sin in my life.

She wasn't doing it on purpose. She wasn't mocking me or she wasn't pointing her finger at me. But just her godly lifestyle, the contrast between that and my lifestyle was very convicting to me. And it made me mad. I was angry. And I don't know why. If you ask me, why are you so mad? I couldn't tell you. But that's what it was. And I remember one day I was talking to Leslie. And our little daughter was there. And she was talking about going to church. And I just, I was so full of rage. I remember I reared back and I just kicked a hole right through our living room wall. Just out of raw anger over there. And she's crying and our daughter's crying. I mean, that was the depth of the frustration I felt. Because I didn't want to face the truth of who I was.

Dr. James Dobson: And yet, her godly character is what drew you toward the Lord.

Lee Strobel: That's exactly right.

Dr. James Dobson: So two things were going on inside of you.

Lee Strobel: Exactly. I was resisting it, and it was convicting to me, and it was making me angry. And at the same time, though, all of the things I thought were going to happen negatively to Leslie and to our marriage didn't happen. And she became more loving and more committed to me and our children. And so it was winsome and it was attractive at the same time. So I remember one Sunday morning, she said to me, "Lee, why don't you go to church with me today?" And I thought, you know what? I'm going to go and get her out of this cult that she's involved in. And I went and I heard a sermon and that was the moment, January the 20th of 1980, that I realized even though I was still an atheist, if this was true, it had huge implications for my life. And that's when I decided to use my journalism training and legal training to investigate whether there's any credibility to Christianity. And that led me on this adventure of a year and nine months of investigating the faith. And the whole time, of course, Leslie is going through this with me. And many times it was not a very pleasant experience.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, you were at that time the award-winning legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, and you had a master's degree in law from Yale Law School. So you were in a very secular world that you're in.

Lee Strobel: You better believe it.

Dr. James Dobson: And all of a sudden, you're unequally yoked.

Lee Strobel: Exactly. And my marriage is up in the air. And the conflict that came over things like, you know, she would want to go to church on Sunday, and I didn't want to go with her. She wanted to give money to the church and I blew up over that. She wanted to raise the children with Christian values, and I didn't care about that.

Dr. James Dobson: It changes everything, doesn't it?

Lee Strobel: Yes. There is no part of marriage that it doesn't affect.

Dr. James Dobson: Leslie, what about the children? How were you dealing with the fact that their father didn't know or love God, and you were trying to teach them that He is everything?

Lee Strobel: Right. Fortunately, Allison... Kyle was much younger, but Allison still was young enough to where it really didn't – it wasn't something she'd articulate. But she would wonder why Daddy wasn't going to church with us. And sometimes I struggled with how to even answer that. But eventually I just said, you know what? You and I and Kyle are going to go to church. Daddy's had a hard week at work, and he just doesn't feel like he can. We feel differently about church, and that's okay.

Dr. James Dobson: So you tried to cover for him.

Leslie Strobel: I kind of covered for him. Eventually it got a little harder as they got a bit older. But I don't know that it ever became a big enough problem because they still were so young.

Dr. James Dobson: How many years did this go on?

Leslie Strobel: Only two. And it felt much longer at the time but thanks to God, it was only two years.

Dr. James Dobson: You do realize we're talking to many people who are right there now. And some of them never really quite got past it. My grandmother and grandfather were like that. My grandfather was an incredibly moral man. His handshake as it was in those days, was his bond. But he didn't want anything to do with the church. He saw hypocrisy there, and he took a look at it and said, that's not for me. And he said to my grandmother, who was deeply committed to Christ, that you can do what you do. Just don't involve me in it. And they had six children. My father was one of them. And my little grandmother weighed 97 pounds would pack up those six kids to get them to church. She would gather them around and pray for them and pray with them and say if I lose one of you it would have been better that I had never been born. That's the way she saw her task.

But her husband would have none of it. And he was a strong man, just 6'5". He was just a powerful man. And she began praying for him, and she prayed for him for 40 years. She fasted weekends. She prayed for him, and he never moved. Now, I don't want to take too much of our time here, but I have to tell you what happened.

Lee Strobel: That is so powerful because, you know, when Leslie says two years for us, you know, and it felt like an eternity in our lives. And yet there are people who will go their whole life, and their spouse will never come to faith.

Dr. James Dobson: That's right, and that's discouraging.

Lee Strobel: It's very discouraging.

Dr. James Dobson: But it can also result in a wonderful conversion. And that's what happened to my grandfather. He had a stroke when he was 69 years of age. And then I had another one. And he was very, very ill. And his daughter, who was grown by then, was upstairs trying to help him, arranging his medication, taking care of him. And she looked at him and he was crying. And no one had ever seen him shed a tear before. And she ran over to him and she knelt down and she said, Daddy, what's wrong? And he said, Honey, go get your mother. And so she went running down the stairs to get my grandmother who came running to his side. And she knelt by his side and said, Tell me what's wrong. And he said, I know I'm going to die. And it's okay. I'm not afraid to die. But it is so dark. Will you pray

for me? She had been asking him if she could pray for him for 40 long years, and he gave his heart to the Lord. And he died two weeks later with the testimony on his lips. I say that to give hope to all those people who have waited and waited and waited. And the Lord seems not to be paying attention, but He was hearing all that time.

Lee Strobel: And, you know, I think one encouragement for people who are in that situation is to realize, that you can have, even though your spouse is not a believer, you can have a Christian marriage to the degree to which you are willing to live out Christian values. So in other words, Leslie, I wasn't a believer, and yet Leslie tried to create as best she could a Christian home. And she pursued honesty and integrity, and she pursued God, and the degree to which I allow that to happen is a degree to which she was able to flourish in her relationship with Christ and create for her and the children a semblance of a Christian home, even though it wasn't truly because I was not a believer.

Dr. James Dobson: Lee, knowing what you know about the Christian faith today, isn't it amazing to you that God wanted you and you didn't want Him?

Lee Strobel: Well, yeah, exactly. I think God didn't give me what I deserved. He gave me grace. And that's what I got from Leslie. And that was one of the things she did that really won me over in the long haul was that God did not give me what I deserve, which was an eternity separated from Him in Hell. I mean, that's what I deserve. And yet He gave me love and He gave me grace and He drew me to Himself over time. And, you know, Leslie, did not give me what I deserved when I would come home drunk. She didn't give me what I deserved when I would let loose with a string of expletives. She gave me love. She gave me grace. Those times when the marriage was at its most tense and when I thought, I'm going to get out of here, those were the times when she would reach out to me physically and she would put her arm around me and she would reconnect with me.

Leslie Strobel: But I look back on that time and I can see God's hand because I was doing, when Lee talks about how in the midst of a difficult time I would reach out when he felt like walking out, that was not Leslie coming. That was the Holy Spirit working through me because I had been praying. I wouldn't know what to do. My natural inclination would be to lash out. That's what I would normally do. But I would sense in my spirit not to do that. Psalm 4:4 was my mantra, which was do not sin in your anger. And that just always would come to mind because I was angry. I was very upset. I couldn't understand why someone so intelligent and who was so open to so many ideas somehow closed his mind off to, The whole idea of Christianity. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't even talk about it or listen to it or go check it out for himself. And so even though I felt angry, I would sense that I needed to just reach out. I remember one time we'd had a blow-up. I don't even remember what it was about. But I was at the sink doing dishes, and he was in the other room, and I just knew God was saying, "Stop doing the dishes. Go in there and just sit with him and tell him you love him." And I didn't want to. I mean, it was the last thing I wanted to do, and I told

God that. But I knew I had to do it to be obedient, and I thought, okay. And we were sort of in that stalemate where no one's talking and it's just icy. But I went in, I sat down, and I just put my arm around him and just said, you know what, I don't want to fight about this stuff. I love you. And that just sort of broke the ice, and it melted and diffused the whole situation so that we kind of laughed about it in the end. That happened over and over again. God was so good to give me eyes to see times when I needed to not be who I normally am in the flesh but to rise above it. And I believe the Christian in the relationship has to do that. You are the one with the wisdom.

Dr. James Dobson: Lee and Leslie Strobel, it's so good to have you here. There are times when we are talking about a subject and you can just feel the message going out through these microphones and out into homes and cars where you're touching the lives of people. I mean, this is such a common problem the church is filled with. And especially women, but sometimes men who do not have a spouse that shares the most important dimension of their lives. And you all have taken us there. And tomorrow you're going to take us home with it, okay? Thank you for being here.

Leslie Strobel: Thank you.

Lee Strobel: Our pleasure.

Roger Marsh: You know, there's a lot of hope to be found in Lee and Leslie Strobel's story, and a reminder that even the deepest spiritual distance between two people is never beyond the reach of a patient pursuing God. You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, featuring Dr. Dobson's conversation with Lee and Leslie Strobel. If you'd like to hear today's program again, or to share it with a friend who needs this same kind of hope and encouragement, you'll find it along with the link for the Strobel's book, *Surviving a Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage*, when you go to James Dobson's Family Talk. And while you're there, be sure you also search for the four-part email series called "Conflict in Marriage." If you've ever wondered why fights arise even when neither you nor your spouse wants to argue, or whether a happily married couple can live together without arguing in the first place, this four-part email series called "Conflict in Marriage" draws on Dr. Dobson's timeless wisdom that will give you immediate practical relief. Go to jdfi.org or drjamesdobson.org and search for that title, "Conflict in Marriage."

You know, conversations like this one reach people because friends like you make them possible. Now, you may have heard that all throughout the month of July, we were featuring a \$250,000 matching grant in celebration of America's 250th anniversary. And I'm pleased to announce that that goal has been met. I personally want to thank you once more for the way that you responded. It was a tremendous encouragement to all of us here to see all of the donations coming in through the mail and to hear the phones ringing and see people making contributions online. But the work of carrying trusted biblical wisdom into the homes across the country and all over the world goes on every day. And

it's friends like you who keep us moving forward. So even now I invite you to partner with us with a gift of any amount. You can give online through our secure website at jdfi.org or call a member of our constituent care team. That number is 877-732-6825. You can also send your tax-deductible donation through the U.S. Postal Service. address your envelope to 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, the zip code 80949.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for listening today. On behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, we appreciate your prayers and ongoing support. Be sure to join us again next time right here as Dr. Dobson continues his honest and encouraging conversation with Lee and Leslie Strobel as they discuss surviving a spiritual mismatch in marriage. That's coming up 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.

- Dr. James Dobson: Love, even genuine love, is a fragile thing. Like a plant, it must be watered and cultivated or it will wither and die.
- Roger Marsh: With another Dr. Dobson Minute, here's Dr. James Dobson.
- Dr. James Dobson: The keen edge of a loving relationship may be dulled through the routine pressures of living, as I experienced during the early days of my own marriage. I was working full-time and trying to finish my doctorate at USC. My wife was teaching school and running our small home. I remember clearly the evening I realized what this busy life was doing to our relationship. We still loved each other, but it had been too long since we'd felt a spirit of warmth and closeness. My textbooks were pushed aside that night. we went for a long walk. The following semester, I took fewer classes and postponed my academic goals to help preserve what I valued more highly. If left unattended, your relationship could die a slow death and no career goal is worth that price.
- Roger Marsh: For more information, visit drdobsonminute.org.