



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Making Marriage Last

Guest(s): Dr. Scott Stanley

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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, and on today's program our theme is Making Marriage Last. We're going to hear a powerful conversation Dr. Dobson had with Dr. Scott Stanley on this topic. Dr. Stanley is a professor of psychology at the University of Denver, an author of several books including *The Heart of Commitment*. His research reveals fascinating insights about how couples can build lasting, intimate relationships. So whether you're a newlywed or if you've been married for many, many years, today's program will offer you some practical wisdom for strengthening your marriage.

We'll also hear a touching reflection on the years of marriage as well as we begin today's program. You're going to hear Dr. Dobson reading from a letter that he wrote to his wife, Shirley, when they had been married for only 21 years. And I say only because for comparison, this year the Dobsons will be celebrating their 65th wedding anniversary. What a milestone.

Well, as we celebrate the beauty of lifelong love, listen now to these words from Dr. James Dobson written to his dear wife, Shirley, and the moving portrait that they represent of what commitment really means through the many seasons of marriage.

Dr. James Dobson: You have become me and I've become you. We are inseparable. I've now spent 46% of my life with you, and I can't even remember much of the first 54. Not one of the experiences I've listed can be comprehended by anyone but the woman who lived through them with me. Those days are gone, but the aroma lingers on in our minds. And with every event during these 21 years, our lives have become more intertwined, blending eventually into this incredible affection that I bear for you today.

I love you SMD. Remember the monogrammed shirt? I love the girl who believed in me before I believed in myself. I love the girl who never complained about huge school bills and books and hot apartments and rented junky furniture and no vacations and humble little Volkswagens. You have been with me, encouraging me, loving me, and supporting me since August 27th, 1960.

And the status that you've given me in our home is beyond what I have deserved.

So why do I want to go on living? It's because I have you to make the journey with. Otherwise, why take the trip? The half-life that lies ahead promises to be tougher than the years behind us. It's in the nature of things that my mom will someday join my father, and then she will be laid to rest beside him in Olathe, Kansas, which has occurred. Then we'll have to say goodbye to your mom and dad.

Everything within me screams no, but my dad's final prayer is still valid. We know it can't always be the way it is now. What then, my sweet wife? To whom will I turn for solace and comfort? To whom can I say I'm hurting and know that I'm understood in more than an abstract manner? To whom can I turn when the summer leaves begin to change colors and fall to the ground? You all have to forgive me. How much have I enjoyed the springtime and the warmth of the summer sun? The flowers and the green grass and the blue sky and the clear streams have been savored to their fullest, but alas, autumn is coming.

Even now I can feel a little nip in the air. I must face the fact that winter lies ahead with its ice and sleet and snow to pierce us through. But in this instance, winter will not be followed by springtime except in the glory of the life to come. With whom then will I spend that final season of my life? None but you, Shirls. The only joy of the future will be in experiencing it as we have the last 21 years hand in hand with the one I love, a young miss named Shirley Deere who gave me everything she had, including her heart. Thank you Shirls for making this journey with me. Let's finish it together.

Roger Marsh:

Well, what a beautiful testament to enduring love. Dr. Dobson's letter reminds us that true intimacy actually grows deeper with each passing year.

And now here on Family Talk to help us understand how to nurture that kind of lasting commitment in our own marriages, we are joined by Dr. Scott Stanley. Dr. Stanley is of America's leading experts on marriage and relationships. For over three decades, he studied what makes marriages succeed in his work at the University of Denver where he serves as a professor of psychology. Dr. Stanley has written several influential books, including *The Power of Commitment* and *Fighting for Your Marriage*. Today, he'll explore insights from his book called *The Heart of Commitment* about building a marriage that stands the test of time. Here once again is Dr. James Dobson, now joined by his guest, Dr. Scott Stanley, on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson:

You've written a book called *The Heart of Commitment*, a compelling research that reveals the secret of lifelong intimate marriage. That's right on the target of what you're talking about.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Absolutely. One of my biggest interests for the last 15 years in the research we've been doing at the University of Denver is commitment, how to think about it, how to understand it, and how to do research on it to see what things we can discover about the real secrets that the couples that are doing well and thriving seem to know intuitively or they've learned and that other couples seem to never have picked up somewhere.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. Let's go back to the excitement and enthusiasm that was there in the beginning. At the time of the marriage, there was no hint at all of what was about to occur a few days later. And yet I've seen it happen that way and you have too, what goes wrong, what blows up in the faces of people who thought they were involved in lifelong marriage?

Dr. Scott Stanley: One thing is that couples before they get married have no idea about how well they're able to handle conflict and communicate together. So many couples, they're happy, they're optimistic, they have all that delight and joy in the relationship together, but they really haven't had to solve much together before the marriage, or maybe there's been some stress around the wedding plans. And shortly into the marriage, life throws the problems at them, and they're having to work through things, and things start to break down, because they find they don't communicate very well when the differences arise. And those negatives of how couples communicate are just very powerful to erode the positive bond between the two.

Now, the other thing that this story brings out is that a lot of people marry with an inadequate sense of what it really means to be married and the commitment that marriage necessitates. Many people think much more about the ceremony and the vows and the commitment they're making on the wedding day and not enough about all the ways that commitment is far more crucial every day thereafter in terms of what the people actually do together.

Now in this case, one of the things you can call attention to with an example like this is one of the most fundamental aspects of commitment is it brings a sense of a future to the relationship, a long-term view. And without that, I don't think any marriage can survive, because any marriage goes up and down in terms of satisfaction. Every marriage rides that wave, and the couples that will blow out and end in divorce or great disillusionment don't have that clear sense of vision for the future that helps them ride the ups and downs of today.

Dr. James Dobson: What happens three or four days later? What happens on the honeymoon? Why is the honeymoon often a time of conflict?

Dr. Scott Stanley: I think partly its reality starts to set in. This is it, this is really marriage. And many people, as the example notes, they have expectations in all kinds of ways, not just for the honeymoon, but in all sorts of ways for how their marriage is going to go, and the expectations are dashed one after another. Many of these expectations that people have are very unrealistic.

Dr. James Dobson: They have no idea how to deal with conflict.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Exactly, so they hit the expectation that's not being met, and many people have never learned how to handle that together and how to use their commitment, but also some ability to handle conflict and communicate to move through that as a team.

Dr. James Dobson: You talked in your research the last time you were here about the predictor of long-term success in marriage. One of them is the ability to handle conflict.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And do it in a way that doesn't rip the self-worth and self-esteem from the other person.

Dr. Scott Stanley: And that's really the focus of the other book that came out that we worked on, *A Lasting Promise*, is how to teach people either before marriage or after marriage the kinds of skills and ways of working through conflict and differences that the couples that do better seem to either know instinctively or they've learned somewhere, because these are things couples can learn.

Now, let me give a key theme that can link both these topics of communication and conflict management and commitment. Both have to do fundamentally with the sense of safety in the marriage. The interaction decide how people handle conflict has to do with the day-to-day sense of safety in terms of talking with you, being with you. And many people, it's not safe over time, because of the power of those negatives.

Commitment brings in the whole picture of safety in a much bigger way. The sense of safety that comes from a view of not only permanence, you can count on me being here, but you can count on me being here for you, you can count on me supporting you till death to his part. Those two things, the day-to-day safety and the long-term big picture are just crucial for what a good marriage is about.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, that's why the title of your book is *The Heart of Commitment*. You see commitment as the key ingredient in long-term marriage, don't you?

Dr. Scott Stanley: It's really the foundation, because if the commitment's not there in some very fundamental ways, nothing else really matters a lot, because no marriage will be consistently satisfying enough that without commitment the couples can make it through, or they may stay together, but it will be one of those grind it out till you die kind of marriages where they're together, but they're miserable with only the kind of commitment I would call constraint commitment, but not the kind of commitment I would call dedication where both are really giving to one another.

Dr. James Dobson: I was reading your book; you make a big distinction between those two of dedication in marriage versus constraint. In other words, you stay together in constraint, because you're determined to make this goal. You've grit your teeth and you gut it out. That's constraint, and dedication is something more than that. Explain it.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. And constraint, just one more thought about it really gets to the cost of leaving. So when people are thinking about the constraints and have a commitment that's mostly characterized by constraint, they're there because of what it would cost them to leave in terms of social pressure, financial concerns, guilt.

Dr. James Dobson: Spiritual obligation?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah. All that sense, but constraints serve a very positive function on marriage, because they keep a couple kind of rooted just day-to-day. I think without constraint commitment, most marriages wouldn't last more than a year.

Having said that, constraint commitment alone doesn't make for a great marriage. What makes for a great marriage is the kind of commitment that's more characterized by the word dedication, which implies mutual devotion to one another, making the right choices, high priority, sense of being a team and an us, and really nurturing the long-term view. That's where dedication lives and that's where the power of a great marriage is.

Commitment, when we make commitments to anything in life, whether that's in marriage or to the Lord or in a career, we're fundamentally making a choice to give up some other choices. That's what commitment requires.

Now, we live in a culture that says hang on to every option, every choice, don't give up anything. So our culture runs just fundamentally in the opposite direction.

Dr. James Dobson: You have a whole chapter on that, don't you?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah, I can say a bit on that. It's a soap box. So commitment calls for us to give up some choices, but a lot of people, they act as if since they made this decision on the wedding day to give up other choices, to forsake all others, that all the other choices dropped off the face of the earth, and that's not the case. A lot of the other options in life that will compete with marriage, whether that's other people or a focus that it's too intense on the career or playing golf all the time and not being with the family, fundamentally, these things reflect a failure to have the right sense of priorities about the things that really matter.

Dr. James Dobson: I think the last time you were here, we talked about the fact that many couples marry somebody they're not even acquainted with, because you put on a face, you don't let anybody see who you really are, you're on your best behavior, you

hide those flaws, and pretty soon they're all out in the open where you can't hide them.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. Yeah. When you get into the day-to-day and the day-to-day and it goes on and on, you see all the stuff you didn't see. I mean, I often encourage people when they've met somebody two months ago and they're thinking of getting married. I say, "Well, you know, don't you at least want to see this person through four seasons? I mean, you don't know what they look like in the summer. You don't know what they're like in the winter." Sometimes people are just in too much of a hurry to make this huge choice, and maybe that even reflects a disrespect of the importance of the choice.

Dr. James Dobson: What if you are involved in a marriage that lacks commitment? We've been talking about getting married and starting out life together. What if we're talking to people right now who have been married for 10 or 15 years and are just hanging on? Can commitment and dedication be re-engendered?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah, I really think so. And let me develop this point a bit. This is one of the last major points in the book. When I talk about dedication as a researcher, that side of commitment, what I see in the research, what I measure, what I see other people looking at in the field, it's agape love from the New Testament. That's what it really comes down to. So the features that you see defined in the New Testament as characteristic of agape love is really what the heart of dedication is about.

Having said that, there's a great illustration about regaining that kind of dedication, that agape love commitment in a relationship when one is sort of lost that first love, and it comes in Christ's letter to the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2. Now, the preeminent point of this passage in Ephesus is really to the church, so it's really a point to us as Christians about losing our first love with the Lord, but the principles there are just as applicable in marriage, and they're really powerful.

And here's the idea, the Lord writes to Ephesus and says, "Okay, you got this going good. This is wonderful, but I got this one problem with you, you've fallen away from your first love. Here's what you need to do. Remember from where you've fallen, repent, and do the things you did at first." That's three steps, three powerful steps. The remember from where you've fallen is a fascinating thing, because what I think the Lord's instructing us to do with Him and what people can do in their marriage, He wants us to remember about how good it used to be, all the fervor and the desire, the way we used to treat each other so kindly, be more polite, move mountains in our schedule to spend time with this person. All these things that we used to do in the relationship that maybe we've gotten away from, if we can remember those things and all the wonderful things that came from those things, it can reawaken the appetite for that positive bond between the two people.

And the do part, I like the idea of do. I mean, do is all over the New Testament, do this. We can have the most wonderful insights or theology in the world, but it has to get to the point of doing. And so when Christ says, do the things you did at first, it's all that list I just gave, it's all those kinds of things that we can remember doing that really reawakens the appetite, and doing now we can often regain a lot of the life of the relationship.

I think people recognize now that making a marriage work is not a cakewalk. People know too many people that are divorced and where it hasn't worked out, whether that's their parents, their friends' parents or friends just right now walking around. And people need to not stop at the point of letting that create fear in them. "Okay, well, I'm afraid to get married. I don't want to get married. I can't make it work." That's not the stopping point. The stopping point is to use that sense of reality that this is not a piece of cake to learn the kinds of things, both in terms of attitude and behavior, that can really make a marriage be different.

And so once they are lined up, for example, with someone to really start working on those communication skills and learning ways to handle conflict, very, very crucial, or even before that to be thinking, well, what do I think commitment in marriage means? To be working on the whole side of the attitudes about that in contrast to the messages of our culture.

Dr. James Dobson: As you know, I write a commentary that's heard around the world now, and I wrote one not too long ago having to do with this issue, and I gave the analogy of two little rowboats on a very choppy lake, and there's a man in one of them and there's a woman in the other, and they start out to cross the lake intending to stay side by side, but before they know it, the boats are getting farther and farther apart, and they're having to shout at each other to even be heard over the sound of the waves, and they get farther and farther apart. And they wind up with one at the northern end of the lake, and the other one at the south, and they have no idea how it happened.

And their purpose was to cross the lake together, but the forces took them, the wind and the waves and the forces of nature took them apart from each other. Marriage is like that because of sickness, because of financial difficulties, because of work, sometimes because of children, sometimes because of great differences, you naturally move away. You don't move toward each other without rowing.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And if you want to stay together, you got to go into it with a notion that you've got to row. Everybody has to put a lot of effort into those oars, and if you don't, you won't stay together, you will drift apart.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: But it doesn't have to be that way.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Since there are going to be times where there's a little more distance that that's going to wax and wane in any marriage, to have a sense of what the destination was, what's the compass heading for our marriage going to be? So then even if they do get a little distant at times, they know how to get back on the course. And when they're back on the course, there's my partner, there's the other boat.

Dr. James Dobson: The oars are made up of commitment.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. That's where the work is.

Dr. James Dobson: That's where the work is.

Dr. Scott Stanley: It's the decision to do the work and to make things happen. And that's where the marriage is live or die.

Dr. James Dobson: And when that goes well, it's the most satisfying thing in life.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Right. I think trust fundamentally derives from a sense of the commitment. In fact, if you think about anything that we trust, anything that anyone trusts, you trust it because it's been there for some time for you. We don't trust things that just popped up in our lives. We trust things that have been there.

For example, one just financial analogy I use, if a bank opens up on the corner near where you live, and the opening day sign says, come on down, bring your deposits, got some great interest rates, but hurry up, we're only going to be here for two weeks. Who's going to run down and put their deposit in that bank? Nobody's going to trust that it's going to be there.

So to have a sense of trust in the first place derives from a sense of commitment, and especially dedication as I talked about it. When one can see evidence of the other's dedication, they have a lot more reason to trust. And the research shows not only are they going to be more relaxed about the future of the relationship, but in the here and now, those people self-disclose more. It's safer to share who they are.

Now, I think all the same theory applies when there's been a betrayal of some sort. The way couples recover trust is by getting back to being really committed, and as Jesus said, doing those things you did at first and maybe even beyond the way they were done at first to really try over time to overcome the sense of fear that's introduced by the betrayal.

Dr. James Dobson: Talk just briefly about infidelity. Have you personally seen couples develop an intimate relationship after having survived that tremendous insult within the marriage?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yes, I have. And I think there's many more couples that actually survived that than you would know. And of course, there's many couples that break up at that point too. I mean, it's a fundamental violation of trust and a sense of what the relationship is about.

Two things I want to say. In fact, let me introduce a concept from the research, because one of the points we can make to the audience is how to prevent getting there in the first place. And one of the things that shows up in my data and in other people's data that do this kind of research is that people that are more dedicated think less seriously and less often about the alternatives to the relationship. It's not that they never think about them. I can't imagine somebody that would never think about them, but how much do they think about and pine away for the grass that looks greener next door?

And furthermore, there's a finding that another researcher has that not only do people think less about the alternatives when they're more committed, when they're aware of an alternative that is really attractive to them, it's almost as if they perceive their internal attraction as a threat to the commitment that they've made. So instead of dwelling on what's so wonderful about this picture-

Dr. James Dobson: They hold out.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: I read that in your book that you're talking there about the myth of the greener grass...

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: ... that everybody thinks it's better over there, but you begin to play that through your mind, and it weakens the bond...

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: ... with the one that you're married to.

Dr. Scott Stanley: And it fuels tremendous resentment. You're not doing this for me that this other person would or these other people could, or whatever it is. The alternative can either be sort of their sense of who's out there. It can be a specific person. And people are very bad at least through a long time in that dynamic. We're not good at seeing the crabgrass in the lawn next door, and we're intimately acquainted with the crabgrass where we live. And what people need to do in that metaphor is need to get away from the fence and take better care of their own lawn, and that's what they need to care about.

Dr. James Dobson: That's well said.

Roger Marsh:

Lasting love is about more than grand romantic gestures, it's about daily choices to stay committed even when the path gets difficult.

Today on Family Talk, we've just heard a conversation featuring Dr. James Dobson and his guest, Dr. Scott Stanley. The wisdom shared by Dr. Stanley combined with Dr. Dobson's touching letter to his wife, Shirley, that we heard earlier in the program show us what true devotion looks like over the decades.

Now, if you missed any portion of today's broadcast or if you'd like to share these powerful insights about marriage with someone who really needs to hear them, you can do so when you go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. You can also find the audio on the Family Talk app by the way. Once you're on our website, you can find complete program information, along with Dr. Stanley's book called *The Heart of Commitment*. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

And if you're looking for daily inspiration to strengthen your marriage, I want to remind you about the free reading plans offered on the Bible App by YouVersion. We've put together two dozen plans to help you build a stronger relationship with your spouse, ranging from topics like the Treasure I Married to the Value of Generosity. To access these free reading plans, simply open the Bible app on your phone or tablet and search for Dr. James Dobson to get started.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for listening. Be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust, for the family you love.

Announcer:

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