

## Have You Tried Everything to Save Your Marriage?

By Dr. James Dobson

Dear Friends,

Some of you are aware that I have been writing books for married couples and their children for more than 45 years, beginning with *Dare to Discipline* in 1970. Writing for families has been a love of my life, which, I hope, has not yet run its course.

Many radio and television hosts have asked me a particular question during interviews. They wanted to know, "Which of your 30 books is your favorite?" I have rarely tried to answer that question because it is rather like naming your favorite child. Nevertheless, I'm going to tell you today which book outranks the others in my mind, and why.

My favorite is *Love Must Be Tough*. It was written for husbands and wives who are experiencing marital conflict and appear to be careening toward divorce. They sometimes turn in desperation to marriage counselors, pastors, psychologists and psychiatrists to help them cope. I have respect for my colleagues and refer often to the most gifted among them. **But let me describe a mistake commonly made by younger professionals who misunderstand the root cause of a couple's problems.**

The counsel these families receive often focuses on suggestions about the way the two partners relate day by day. It might be proposed that they reserve an evening each week for "date nights," or that they seek to improve their sexual relationship, or that the husband should lessen his workload. Such advice can be helpful in re-establishing communication and understanding between them, but it is probably inadequate to save a dying marriage. Why? Because a more fundamental problem lies below the surface. The more dangerous difficulty involves the way the partners perceive each other. The core issue is one of disrespect. In fact, it affects nearly every aspect of human behavior.

The way employees perform at work is a product of how they respect the boss. The way children obey or misbehave reflects their respect for parents. The way nations coexist is directly attributable to how they respect neighboring countries. And certainly, the way husbands and wives relate is a function of their mutual respect or the lack thereof. Indeed, that is why marital discord almost always emanates from seething disrespect within in the relationship!

Let me illustrate this point by sharing an actual letter that came to me from a woman with a broken spirit. She has been through the turbulent waters I have described. I'll call her Linda, and this is what she wrote:

*Dear Dr. Dobson:*

*I have a problem and it has become a terrible burden to me. It is affecting me both physically and spiritually. I grew up in a good Christian home, but married a man who was not a Christian. Paul and I have had a rough time—a lot of anger and fighting. He has refused to participate in the family as father of our three children—leaving everything up to me. He likes to bowl and watch football games on TV—and he sleeps all day Sunday. So things have always been rocky. But a much more serious problem arose a few years ago.*

*Paul began to get interested in a beautiful divorcee who works as his bookkeeper. At first it seemed innocent, as he helped her in various ways. But I began to notice our relationship was deteriorating. He always wanted this other woman along whenever we went anywhere, and he spent more and more time at her house. He said they were doing accounting work but I didn't believe it. I began to nag and complain, and it just made him more determined to be with her. Gradually, they fell in love with each other, and I didn't know what to do about it.*

*I bought a book about this time in which the author promised if I'd obey my sinner husband, God wouldn't allow any wrong to happen so long as I was submissive. Well, in my panic, I thought I would lose him forever, and I agreed to let the other woman come into our bedroom with us. I thought it would make Paul love me more, but it just made him fall deeper in love with her.*

*Now he is confused and doesn't know which one of us he wants. He doesn't want to lose me and says he still loves me and our three kids, but he can't give her up, either. I love Paul so dearly and I have begged him to turn our problem over to the Lord. I love the other woman too and know she is also hurting, but she doesn't believe God will punish this sin. I have experienced terrible jealousy and pain, but I always put the needs of my husband and his friend above my own. But what do I do now? Please help me. I am desperate.*

*Linda*

Let me tell you what is going on inside Linda's troubled mind. As she told us, she is in a state of panic. Fear of losing a beloved husband or wife is a terrifying experience, especially if the spouse is the parent of their children. The pain of rejection and loneliness is indescribable. Nothing can compare with the agony of knowing that the person to whom you pledged eternal devotion has betrayed your trust and is now engaged in sexual intimacies with a "stranger,"—a competitor—a more beautiful or handsome playmate. Death itself would be easier to tolerate than being tossed aside like an old shoe.

As panic reaches its full stride, the wounded partner begins to appease her husband. She promises to be a better lover, to be more considerate, to quit work or go to work or have another baby or whatever is perceived to be important to the disenchanted mate. Unfortunately, the mind of the other spouse is already settled, and nothing succeeds.

This is what Linda was dealing with when she wrote me. She had become so panic-stricken that she actually allowed "the other woman" to come into their bedroom. She was willing to do anything to bring Paul back.

Appeasement of this nature destroys what is left of a romantic relationship. It often leads directly to war, whether it is between husbands and wives or between antagonistic nations. World War II might have been prevented and 50 million lives saved if British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had understood the folly of appeasement. He flew to Munich to meet the demands of Adolf Hitler. Winston

Churchill called World War II *the most preventable war in modern times*. This is where appeasement leads, whether in affairs of state or affairs of the heart.

In Linda's case, Paul forced her to commit immoral acts in their bedroom. Not only was this a cruel form of blackmail, it was also a heartless test of her confidence and self-respect. I'm sorry to say, she failed it.

In a marital relationship where the mystery and dignity have not been preserved in the relationship, or where one partner clings to the other in desperation, the couple is faced with a serious "balance of payments" deficit. All the emotional energy flows in one direction, which is certain to deplete reserves and resources. This is precisely what happens when an insecure spouse begins to smother the other. Even if infidelity and abandonment are never threatened, the pleading by one partner for the affection and attention of the other serves to short-circuit the attraction between them.

Let me take a run at telling you what I would say to Linda if she were here. I only have a few pages to summarize a complicated understanding, but let me try. You can also read more about this topic in *Love Must Be Tough*. In the meantime, I suggest that you open the cage door and allow your marital partner to escape. This can be done in person or by a carefully worded letter. Here is one I provided for Linda to use as a guide.

*"Paul, I've been through some very tough moments since you decided to leave, as you know. My love for you is so profound that I just couldn't face the possibility of life without you. To a person like me who expected to marry only once and to remain committed for life, it is a severe shock to see our relationship begin to unravel. Nevertheless, I have done some intense praying and soul searching in recent months, and I now realize that I have been attempting to hold you against your will. That simply can't be done. As I reflect on our courtship and early years together, I'm reminded that you married me of your own free choice. I did not blackmail you or twist your arm or offer you a bribe. It was a decision you made without pressure from me. Now you say you want out of the marriage, and obviously, I have to let you go. I'm aware that I can no more force you to stay*

*today than I could have made you marry me in 2002 (or whenever). You are free to go. If you never call me again, then I will accept your decision. I have but one sincere regret from our years together: it is agreeing to let you bring your girlfriend into our most intimate chamber. That was wrong for you, wrong for her, and terribly wrong for me. Never again will I yield to something so perverse. I have asked God to forgive me for even considering such a demand.*

*As you know, Paul, this entire experience has been extremely painful for me, but I'm going to make it. The Lord has been with me thus far and He'll guide me in the future. You and I had some wonderful times together, Paul. You were my first real love and I'll never forget the memories that we shared. I will pray for you and trust that God will guide you in the years ahead."*

Slowly, unbelievably, the trapped spouse witnesses the cage door vibrate just a bit, and then start to rise. He can't believe it. This person to whom he has felt bound hand and foot for years has now set him free! It isn't necessary to fight off her advances—her grasping hands—any more.

"There must be a catch," he thinks. "It's too good to be true. Talk is cheap. This is just another trick to win me back. In a week or two, she'll be crying on the phone again, begging me to come home. She's really weak, you know, and she'll crack under pressure."

It is my strongest recommendation that you prove your partner wrong in this expectation. Let him marvel at your self-control in coming weeks. Only the passage of time will convince him that you are serious—that he is actually free. He may even test you during this period by expressions of hostility or insults, or by flirtation with others. But one thing is certain: he will be watching for signs of weakness or strength. The vestiges of respect hang in the balance.

If the more vulnerable spouse passes the initial test and convinces the partner that his freedom is secure, some interesting changes begin to occur in their relationship. Please understand that every situation is unique and I am merely describing typical reactions, but these developments are extremely common in

families I have seen. Most of the exceptions represent variations on the same theme.

**Three distinct consequences can be anticipated when a previously-demanding lover begins to let go:**

1. The trapped partner no longer feels it necessary to fight off the other, and their relationship improves. It is not that the love affair is rekindled, necessarily, but the strain between the two partners is often eased.

2. As the disinterested spouse begins to feel free again, the question he has been asking himself changes. After having wondered for weeks or months, "How can I get out of this mess?" He now asks, "Do I really want to go?" Just knowing that he can have his way often makes him less anxious to achieve it. Sometimes it turns him around 180 degrees and brings him back home!

3. The third change occurs not in the mind of the wayward spouse but in the mind of the vulnerable one. Incredibly, he or she feels better—somehow more in control of the situation. As I wrote, there is no greater agony than journeying through a vale of tears, waiting in vain for the phone to ring or for a miracle to occur. Instead, the person has begun to respect himself or herself and starts to receive small evidences of respect in return. Even though it is difficult to let go once and for all, there are ample rewards for doing so. One of those advantages involves the feeling that she has a plan—a program—a definite course of action to follow. That is infinitely more comfortable than experiencing the utter despair of powerlessness that she felt before. And, little by little, the healing process begins. And, in a surprising number of cases, if a victim stands his or her ground, the spouse comes back and the marriage is saved. It comes down to this:

By this point in our discussion, some of my readers are undoubtedly beginning to ask a question that means more to me than any other aspect of the work we are doing. This is it: Is the advice offered herein consistent with Scripture? It is certainly different from what many Christian leaders would recommend.

If I felt that my recommendations contradicted biblical teachings, I would never utter them again. God's Word is the standard for all human behavior and values. And in this context, there are specific passages that support the conclusions I have drawn. The most relevant is found in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15:

*If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. (NIV)*

Those seem like very straightforward instructions to me. The Apostle Paul was talking to men and women who were married to unbelievers—some of whom who were undoubtedly involved in bad marriages. He was telling them unequivocally that divorce was not an option. Period. They were instructed to remain faithful and try to win their non-Christian spouses to the Lord. Good counsel! But Paul was also sensitive to those who had no choice in the matter. Like Linda, they were unable to hold their partners at home. In those instances, they were advised to let the partners go. There is no blame in accepting a fate beyond their control. And just as I have indicated, this acceptance of the inevitable will result in "peace." Here we see the marvelous wisdom of the Creator as expressed through His servant, Paul.

Well, that is my message for this month. I have provided more detail than usual because there are so many hurting families out there who are dealing with the kinds of problems I have described. Since one of our greatest purposes in this ministry is to help repair broken spirits, I thought this discussion might "hit home" for someone.