

LOVE  
MUST BE  
TOUGH

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DR. JAMES DOBSON



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*This book is dedicated to every person who has been  
rejected and wounded by a husband or wife  
on whom everything depended.  
I pray that these words will begin the healing process  
and provide a basis for genuine forgiveness to thrive.  
For only in forgiveness can peace be found.*

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# PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

Everybody's talking about tough love these days. We seem to see or hear the term everywhere we go. It is used by investigative reporters, television news anchors, and soapbox orators, each pushing a particular agenda and a particular notion of what tough love is all about.

But before the expression slides too quickly into the American vernacular, let us pause to remember that it was 1983, two decades ago, that Dr. James Dobson coined not only the term in his landmark book on marriage and parenthood, *Love Must Be Tough*, but also the concept that a mature love relationship is one that is built on mutual respect and genuine accountability.

Few books ever written have received the accolades, tributes, and fan mail that have descended upon *Love Must Be Tough*. A perennial favorite, winner of the prestigious Gold Medallion Award of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, and with more than a decade on the bestsellers lists, this book is still saving marriages and changing lives. Thousands of men, women, and children have been touched by the sensitive insights and wise counsel contained within these pages, and many of them write to say so.

In a note to Dr. Dobson, one grateful reader wrote, “Your principles are absolutely correct. I am living proof!” Another said, “My life will never be the same,” while still another made the stirring comment that, “your book saved my marriage, and my life.” Letters like these have come to the offices of Focus on the Family from all over the world, expressing the heartfelt thanks of those who have gained a new outlook and a new context for their lives from this volume.

Today Focus on the Family, the international ministry for families founded by Dr. Dobson, reaches more than 220 million listeners daily through radio broadcasts on more than 7,000 affiliates around the world. Through the efforts of a staff of nearly 1,300 men and women, Focus on the Family has grown to become a multimedia outreach, utilizing the traditional mediums of communications such as television, radio, and print publications, along with numerous emerging technologies, including Internet-based podcasts and various online products.

At the heart of this classic work, and in all areas of the ministry of Focus on the Family, is a dynamic commitment to Jesus Christ and the truth of Scripture. A licensed psychologist and former professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern California, Dr. Dobson has seen the stresses of modern life firsthand, and he brings years of experience to his analyses of the causes and cures of America’s problems. He has served on national task force panels and commissions under three presidents, and his numerous books, film series, and daily radio broadcasts have helped to define the pro-family agenda in this country and to shape the debate over “family values.”

It is with genuine pleasure that we introduce this edition of *Love Must Be Tough*, not only in celebration of its ongoing success, but in the knowledge that the counsel and wisdom contained in these pages, seasoned with love and the blessings of God, will save other marriages and other lives in years to come.

# INTRODUCTION

Sit down, Carol. I have to talk to you about something very serious. I know what I'm going to say will come as a shock to you, but I can't withhold the truth any longer. You deserve to know that I've been involved in an affair with a woman at the office for nearly eighteen months. Her name is Brenda and she is very attractive. It started as an innocent flirtation, but quickly progressed into something more—much more. Now we are unable to pretend any longer. That's why I've made an appointment with an attorney, and I plan to divorce you as quickly as possible. I'm sorry! Honestly, I am. What more can I say? I never intended to hurt you. But I just don't love you any longer; and I *do* love Brenda—very deeply. So, Carol, I'm asking you to make it easy for both of us, and of course, for the kids. We'll all be better off as soon as this mess is settled.

**W**ith those words, the world falls off its axis for an unsuspecting woman and the children who can't understand why she cries. Suddenly, everything stable in their lives has been shattered.

Rejection and insult are blended with pain and remorse. Self-esteem collapses like a grand old building scheduled for demolition. Security and confidence give way to fear and anxiety. The future loses its significance. But most disturbing of all, the woman who felt loved and respected a few hours before now feels utterly disdained and unlovable.

How common this set of circumstances has become in the Western world, not only for the Carols and Jeannies and Patricias around us, but also for the Robs and Toms and Carls. Whether for reasons of infidelity or because of one of the other great marriage killers, many husbands and wives find themselves being dragged relentlessly toward an unwanted divorce. For some, the realization does not come as a startling “announcement” like the one that shattered Carol. Rather, they watch helplessly as their marriages wither over a period of years, being consumed by an insidious cancer that gnaws at the soul of the relationship. They turn this way and that, searching desperately for answers—solutions—remedies. Unfortunately—and this is the critical point—the advice they are given by friends and even counselors is often disastrous in its effect.

The book you are about to read provides an alternative for those in the midst of family crises. My purpose in writing it has been to offer some practical tools—some understandings—which should be useful in drawing an apathetic husband or wife back in the direction of commitment. It may be surprising to learn that human conflict, *if properly managed*, can be the vehicle for transforming an unstable relationship into a vibrant, healthy marriage. On the other hand, the wrong response in moments of crisis can quickly smother the dying embers of love.

I should acknowledge at the outset that some of the principles I will offer may be controversial within Christian circles. It is my belief that the advice traditionally offered to victims of infidelity and other violations of trust has often been unbiblical and destructive. But obviously, not everyone will agree. To those who draw differing conclusions, I can



only ask for charity as we seek to resolve the most difficult family problems with our limited knowledge and insight.

But that's enough for now. Let me offer one precaution before we proceed. If you are a husband or wife who is steadily losing the one you love—if you sense a growing disrespect and disdain from the most important person in your world—this book is intended for your eyes only. *Do not ask your partner to read it with you.* At least, you should review it first and then decide for yourself whether or not to reveal its message. It has been my experience that the principles of loving toughness are most effective when they are not discussed within the confines of a troubled marriage. I think you will soon understand why that is true.

Thank you for permitting me to share some new concepts with you. I hope you will find them helpful, even if you do not have a family in crisis.

## WITH LOVE TO THE VICTIMS

**M**ore than one hundred thousand letters and hundreds of telephone calls pour through our Focus on the Family offices each month, representing the full range of human circumstance and need. Every form of suffering and anguish, as well as many joys and triumphs, is shared with us in intimate detail from day to day. Included in that mail recently was a poignant letter from a man I'll call Roger.\* His story moved me deeply.

A few months ago, my wife, Norma, left to go to the grocery store in a nearby shopping center. She told our four children that she would be back in half an hour and warned them to behave themselves. That occurred on Saturday morning. Six hours later she had not returned, and I began a frantic search for her. I could imagine her being kidnapped or raped or even something worse. By Sunday morning I called the Detroit police, but they said they could not help until she had been gone forty-eight hours. The children and I were worried *sick!*

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\*All the letters quoted in this book have been modified to protect the names and identities of the writers.

We requested prayer from our church and Christian friends, especially for Norma's safety. She had left no notes or messages with friends, and she didn't call. We did find her car behind the shopping center, locked and empty. The police theorized that she had run away, but I didn't agree. That just wasn't like the woman I had lived with for fourteen years...the mother of my four children. We had been getting along quite well, actually, and had been planning to take a brief vacation over the Labor Day weekend.

On Tuesday, I obtained the services of a well-known police detective and asked him to help us locate my wife—or at least discover what had happened to her. Well, he began interviewing her friends and associates and the details unfolded. To my utter shock, it became clear that Norma had left of her own free will with a married man from her place of employment. I just couldn't believe it.

Then about two weeks later, I got a "Dear John" letter, saying she didn't love me anymore—that our marriage was finished. Just like that, it was over. She said she would be returning in a few months to fight for the children, and that they would be living with her in Kansas.

Dr. Dobson, I tell you truthfully that I have always been a faithful father and husband. Even since my wife left, I have taken good care of the kids. I did the best I could to pull our lives together and keep going...to try to make a decent home for these four bewildered youngsters. Nevertheless, the court ruled in my wife's favor last month, and now I am alone.

I built our house a few years ago with my own hands, and now it is empty! All I have to show for the family I lost is a stack of Norma's bills and the memories that were born in these walls. My kids will be raised in an un-Christian home, five hundred miles away, and I hardly have enough money to even visit them!

My life is a shambles now. I have nothing but free time to think about the woman I love...and the hurt and rejection I feel. It is an awful experience. Norma has destroyed me. I will never recover. I am lonely and depressed. I wake up in the night thinking about what might have been...and what is. Only God can help me now!

I wish this letter from Roger represented a rare tragedy that occurred only in the most unusual of circumstances. Unfortunately, variations on this theme are increasingly common today. Sexual intrigue has become a familiar pattern in today's marriages, not only outside the framework of the Christian church but within it as well. And, of course, the most vulnerable victims of family instability are the children who are too young to understand what has happened to their parents.

That tragic impact on the next generation was graphically illustrated to me in a recent conversation with a sixth-grade teacher in an upper middle-class California city. She was shocked to see the results of a creative writing task assigned to her students. They were asked to complete a sentence that began with the words "I wish." The teacher expected the boys and girls to express wishes for bicycles, dogs, television sets, and trips to Hawaii. Instead, *twenty* of the thirty children made reference in their responses to their own disintegrating families. A few of their actual sentences were as follows:

*The most  
vulnerable victims  
of family  
instability are  
the children.*

- I wish my parents wouldn't fight and I wish my father would come back.
- I wish my mother didn't have a boyfriend.
- I wish I could get straight A's so my father would love me.

- I wish I had one mom and one dad so the kids wouldn't make fun of me. I have three moms and three dads and they botch up my life.
- I wish I had an M1 rifle so I could shoot those who make fun of me.

I know it's hardly front-page news to announce that the family is in trouble today, but it will always distress me to see little children like these struggling with such chaos at a time when simply growing up is a major undertaking. Millions of their peers are caught in the same snare.

*The marriage is  
beyond repair.  
But could it have  
been saved?*

Consider the plight of Roger's children in the letter I shared. First, they lost their mother, then watched their father immersed in grief and agony, and finally found themselves jerked from familiar surroundings and transplanted into another state with a new guy who wanted to be called "Dad."

They will never be the same! And why was this upheaval necessary? Because their mother cared more about her own happiness and welfare than she did about theirs. As a young woman, she had stood at an altar before God and man, solemnly promising to love and to cherish Roger—for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, forsaking all others, till separated by the hand of death. Unfortunately, Norma changed her mind.

It is apparent that the marriage between these former lovers is now beyond repair. But could it have been saved? Were there signs and symptoms that Roger failed to notice in the course of recent years? Would any advice by some profound "Solomon of psychology" have prevented the ultimate tragedy? Before attempting to answer these important questions, let's consider another troubled family that has not yet passed the point of no return. Their difficulties are summarized in the following letter from a wife and mother whom I'll call Linda. Please give careful attention

to this letter, for I will be referring to it throughout the remainder of this book.

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 divorcée 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'm on the bottom looking up.

Linda

Have you ever been presented with a problem of this nature by either friend or relative? If so, what counsel have you offered? Do you think Linda handled the crisis appropriately? Would you have permitted your husband or wife to bring another lover into your bedroom in a last-ditch attempt to save your crumbling marriage? Linda's motives seem clear enough. She knows that her husband just might leave her if she doesn't accommodate him in every way possible, and perhaps his escapade with the "beautiful divorcée" will blow over and be forgotten if she can avoid antagonizing him. And after all, doesn't the Bible say that "Charity [love] suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not

behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked" (1 Corinthians 13:4–5, KJV)? Love also "hopeth all things" and "endureth all things" (v. 7). Isn't it reasonable, therefore, for Linda to hold steady and "obey [her] sinner husband" in anticipation of a miracle? Would you have agreed with the wisdom of this approach? Or would you have told her to divorce the bum and get him out of her life? Is there a third alternative?

*We must never underestimate the power of sexual chemistry.*

Based on more than thirty years of experience in marriage counseling, I am of the opinion that Linda's tolerance and longsuffering will probably be fatal to her marriage, and that her advisor has misinterpreted the Bible. If she deliberately set out to destroy

what was left of her relationship with her husband, she could not do much more than has already been done. Though I empathize with her and intend no disrespect in this context, Linda has already made several fundamental mistakes that have contributed mightily to the present disaster in her home.

Linda's first error occurred in not recognizing the threat imposed by a beautiful divorcée. We must never underestimate the power of sexual chemistry existing between an attractive, needy, available woman and virtually any man on the face of the earth. In the case of Linda's husband, he suddenly found himself hopscotching between their two houses to provide whatever service the gorgeous-one might desire, while his wife concluded, "It seemed innocent." Innocent indeed! That's like a farmer thinking the fox visited his henhouse because it enjoyed the company of chickens!

Linda's second error occurred after observing that her marriage was going downhill. That was an extremely important moment in their relationship when an appropriate reaction from Linda might have pulled her playboy husband back from the precipice. But alas, she was ill prepared for the task. She nagged and complained. How inadequate but how human! Her husband was rapidly falling head over heels in love with "the other woman," and Linda's only response was hand wringing and verbal abuse. That form of reproof is about as effective with a wayward spouse as it is with a disobedient toddler: he doesn't even *hear* it!

The key word in the next phase of this story is *panic*. Linda could see the handwriting on the wall. It scrawled the frightening word *divorce* and moved on. How terrifying to one whose entire life is her family! She could visualize herself as the mother of three fatherless children, struggling to survive financially and emotionally in a lonely, broken home. Furthermore, she was losing the man she loved with all her being. And as panic is irrational, so was her reaction to it. She brought the other woman into her bedroom in a desperate attempt to occupy even a crowded corner of her husband's heart. What an



incredible error in judgment! She soon discovered the inevitable result: “It just made him fall deeper in love with her.”

The best news I can give Linda is that it is still possible for her to save her marriage, but she hasn’t a minute to waste. Her husband has admitted that a spark of love still glows under the smoldering ashes (“He doesn’t want to lose me and says that he still loves me and our three kids”), but she must not smother it! One more bad move and he will be gone forever. He is in a state of confusion and can be swayed one way or the other, but how can Linda tug him in her direction? She’s tried everything in her own playbook and nothing has worked. What does she do now? If she is like so many others in today’s world, she will be baffled by the question.

*She nagged and  
complained.  
How inadequate  
but how human!*

The frequency with which I have been confronted by problems similar to the plight of Linda and Roger has led me to write the book you are reading. I’m especially concerned about the person in an unsatisfying relationship whose mate could not seem to care less. Let me be more specific. In any apathetic or dying marriage, there is typically one partner who is relatively unconcerned about the distance between them, while the other is anxious or even panic-stricken over it. The detached spouse, whether husband or wife, may not realize how much danger the marriage is in or may not care. Therefore, that person resists any effort by his mate to entice him into counseling or compromises or even meaningful conversations to address their difficulties. “We have no serious problems,” he contends.

The vulnerable partner, who could represent either sex but is more likely *initially* to be female, is aware that something precious is slipping away day by day. Everything of value is hanging in the balance, and she awakens in the midnight hours to contemplate the future. She thinks of the children—those beautiful kids who slumber unknowingly in their bedrooms—and wonders what will happen to

them. She reaches for the affection and attention of her mate, and experiences depression when she doesn't get it.

I'm not implying, of course, that frail marriages can be blamed entirely on one spouse, and I'm accusing neither men nor women. Marital conflict *always* involves an interaction between two imperfect human beings who share the responsibility to one degree or another. Nevertheless, there is usually one partner who would do anything to hold the home together—and another who seems disinterested in the relationship.

The book you hold is dedicated, therefore, to that vulnerable member of the family who can be thought of as a victim in extreme cases. This is the only text of which I am aware whose primary purpose is to help a distressed person strengthen or preserve his or her marriage, *even in the absence of a willing spouse*. What advice can be offered to a woman like Linda whose husband is entangled in an affair, or a man like Roger whose wife seems to disrespect and hate him, or a wife whose husband is an alcoholic or drug abuser or child molester? And what about the woman who loves her husband and is loved by him in return, but worries about the total absence of romantic excitement between them? Is there any way she can heat up their relationship without nagging her husband incessantly?

Virtually every counseling program now in existence for such families is designed to bring together two people who can agree, at least, to discuss their problems. Or if therapy is offered for a single partner, it is directed at strengthening that individual to cope with the crisis and go it alone, if necessary. But our purpose here is unique: we want to help *one* spouse maximize the chances of preserving the marriage, as in Linda's case, and to survive till the long night is over. It's an ambitious undertaking.

In the process of reaching out to the hurting members of the family, it is my desire to accomplish much more. The principles I will describe are not only relevant to husbands and wives in a time of crisis; they are applicable to healthier marriages, too. Indeed, I wish they

could be taught to every engaged or newlywed couple in the morning of their lives together. There would be fewer bitter divorces if young husbands and wives knew how to draw their drifting partners toward them, rather than relentlessly drive them away.

But the concepts I will share have even broader applicability than the interaction between husbands and wives. As we will see, they are relevant to *all* human relationships, including employers and employees, parents and children, pastors and parishioners, businesspeople and laborers, guards and prisoners, Americans and Russians, and all the other categories of people who share an interface from time to time. In other words, I will be describing in subsequent chapters what I consider to be some universal concepts that cut across cultures, sexes, races, and economic circumstances. And unless I have missed the mark, they will hit somewhere near your neck of the woods in one context or another.

Now isn't that just like an author to promise the moon to his readers? All writers have this tendency to overestimate the significance of their views. Books being published today offer everything from immeasurable wealth for men to instantly smooth thighs for women. Unfortunately, these authors rarely deliver on their promises; they remind me of "Professor Miraculous" in the Old West who sold his Elixir of Life from the back of his covered wagon and then left town...fast.

Hoping not to fall into the same "cure-all" trap, let me tell you candidly how I feel about the concepts you are about to read. Genuine insights into human behavior are not everyday occurrences—at least not for me. Indeed, if one stumbles onto two or three fundamental principles in the course of a lifetime, he has done well. The pages that follow focus on one of my allotted few. I've called the concept *love must be tough*. It won't smooth out your thighs or make you wealthy, but it should help you cope better with the people around you.

# NOTES

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