Marriage Mentoring

Guest: Les and Leslie Parrott

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Bob: There's a lot of discussion these days around the subject of mentoring, marriage mentoring. Have you ever stopped to ask yourself, "Do you think we would qualify as marriage mentors? Do you think we could do that?" Here is input from Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott.

Les: A marriage mentor is a seasoned, experienced couple that is relatively happy. They don't have to be perfect but relatively happy in their relationship.

Leslie: In fact, if they think they're perfect they might not be ready.

Les: That's a red flag, exactly -- "We've got all the answers," yeah. But it's a couple that is -- has this and is willing to invest in another couple. It's as simple as that.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, January 15th. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. Today we're looking for a few good couples who can be marriage mentors.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today, thanks for joining us. I want to go back to 1972 -- 1972 -- all right?

Dennis: All right.

Bob: That was the year -- well, some of our listeners are going, "We weren't born in 1972." That was the year Nixon won in a landslide, right? It was the year that Campus Crusade did the big thing down in Dallas.

Dennis: Explo '72.

Bob: You were a part of that, right?
Dennis: That's right.

Bob: And it was the year that Barbara Peterson agreed to become Mrs. Dennis Rainey.

Dennis: That's right. We started our journey as a couple together, and why the focus on 1972, Bob?

Bob: I'm just wondering …

Dennis: I mean, it's a great year, no doubt about it.

Bob: You lived your first year of marriage in Boulder, Colorado, is that right?

Dennis: I did.

Bob: Did you have a couple in Boulder, friends of yours, older couple, somebody who had been married a few years ahead of you down the track, came alongside you guys and said, "Let us help you out?"

Dennis: Not formally, but we did have an older couple in the Boulder area who kind of took us under their wing, and I think we learned a great deal from them, just as a couple, as they -- well, they'd been married, I think, 25, 30 years at the time.

Barbara did have, years later, when I went to Dallas Seminary, an older woman in her life from the Dallas-Fort Worth area who built into her life and made a huge difference, and we have a couple of friends with us, Les and Leslie Parrott join us on FamilyLife Today who I know believe the same thing. Les, Leslie, welcome to the broadcast.

Les: Thanks, you guys, good to be with you.

Leslie: It's absolutely great.

Dennis: Les and Leslie are the co-founders and also co-directors of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University, and they have developed a system of mentoring for married couples -- not just young married couples but all married couples.

You say in your kit that you put together that marriage mentoring is a sleeping, or a slumbering, giant in church?
Les: Right, absolutely. I mean, I think it is time to wake up the sleeping giant in the church. This is an army of marriage mentors. In fact, our goal -- we talk about a million marriage mentors. Can you imagine what would happen to the divorce rate if we could raise up a million marriage mentors? And we can. I mean, they're out there. They haven't been tapped, and these are people that are hearing our voices right now that are thinking, "Yeah, you know, I could probably invest in a young couple or a couple that's struggling or a couple that even wants to move from good to great. That's what we mean by the sleeping giant.

Leslie: And I'm glad you said that, because these aren't mentors just in the first stages of married life. These are mentors that will take on a couple at different phases -- couples that may be going through something a little more traumatic, and you think, "Hey, our story could really enrich another couple's life. We've been there."

Dennis: A number of years ago I wrote a book called "One Home at a Time," and in that book, near the end of the it, one of the things that I felt like needed to happen that I think you guys have also picked up on, and what you've heard back from the church, is that we need to enlist a number of laymen in the battle.

The problem is there are not enough professionals to cover the needs of marriages and families, and I'm talking about counselors, I'm talking about pastors, even educators at your level, Seattle Pacific University, who can build into the lives of the next generation. And I believe, with you, that the next generation hangs in the balance, and the difference is going to be made by a group of older marriage mentors who have been married, in my opinion, I think they can do it this young because I've watched my youngest son, Samuel, and his wife do it. I think you can start in your -- anywhere from three to five years of marriage, because you've been around the barn a couple of times, you've made a few mistakes, a few errors and, frankly, marriage mentoring, a good bit of it, is just sharing out of your errors and your mistakes.

Bob: Well, and the reality is most people don't do anything about their marriage until something's wrong with it. You know, as long as …

Leslie: … unfortunately …

Bob: … the daily feels okay, you just kind of keep moving along, and then pretty soon it starts to drive, and you go, "We've got a problem." That's when you go to the counselor or the pastor. If
people would be proactive, Leslie, it would keep them out of the
ditch and keep that vehicle running smoothly.

Leslie: Absolutely. I love what you said, too, about your kids, because
here is the truth -- this is kind of an adventure, it's a fun thing. And
we sometimes think of marriage mentoring almost like you're a tour
guide. You know, if someone's coming to your town, they'll call us
and say, "Hey, we're coming to Seattle. What shall we do?" And
we don't feel like, well, we have to be a professional tour guide or
something. We tell them about our favorite restaurants and what
do you guys like to do and we hook them up, and they'll have a
great time, and you can do that.

Les: Yeah, if they ask about the weather, you think, "Well, I'm not a
meteorologist, how could I answer that question?" You go, "Well,
here's what we wear," you know …

Dennis: Hey, when you go to Seattle, we all know what the weather is going
to be.

Bob: Bring your slicker, just bring your raincoat.

Dennis: October to about April, we know what it's going to be.

Les: You want to talk about Arkansas now?

[laughter]

The truth is, you don't have to be an expert, that's the encouraging
thing here. You have to be vulnerable -- and, by the way, this is
age-old. This is not a new idea. I mean, this is something -- in fact,
we went -- we comb through the Bible for biblical examples of
marriage mentoring, and there are a lot.

Leslie: Well, of mentoring, you know, because when it comes to this
concept of how faith is transmitted, mentoring is it -- discipleship.
You know, we know that, and there are so many examples from Eli
and Samuel to Elizabeth and Mary, I mean, every kind of example
about mentoring is the way.

Les: Moses, Joshua, Barnabas and Paul, Paul and Timothy, and, of
course, Jesus and the disciples. But I love this verse from 1
Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 8. It says, "We loved you so much
that we were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of
God but our lives as well." And that's exactly what a marriage
mentor is doing -- sharing their lives with this couple.
Dennis: I thought the verse you were going to quote when you mentioned Paul and Timothy was from Paul's second letter to Timothy, chapter 2, verse 2. In fact, this is one of my favorite verses in the Bible, because it speaks of this generational relay race that we're talking about here -- "And these things, which you have heard from me" -- that's Paul speaking to Timothy -- "in the presence of many witnesses." So there was accountability. "These entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." There's four generations of learners, and that's what a disciple is. The word "disciple" means "learner" or "follower."

Now, I want to pull back and just ask a very basic, fundamental question, because I think as we talk about marriage mentoring, Les, I think people have a tendency to put this up in some professional category where you have to go be certified, you have to have at least two years at your Center for Relationships and 23 FamilyLife Weekend to Remember conferences -- I mean, you've got all these expectations people have of themselves. Can you give us a working definition of what a mentor is?

Les: Yeah, a marriage mentor is a seasoned, experienced couple that is relatively happy. They don't have to be perfect but relatively happy in their relationship.

Leslie: In fact, if they think they're perfect, they might not be ready.

Les: That's a red flat, exactly -- "We've got all the answers." But it's a couple that is -- has this and is willing to invest in another couple. It's as simple as that, and that requires some vulnerability, but it doesn't require a master's degree or a Ph.D. or any huge extensive training program.

We put this kit together, it's a DVD program that has workbooks, training manuals, for the husband and the wife to go through 10 essential skills, and these are skills that are kind of intuitive for a lot of people but kind of need to be sharpened a little bit, and some of the skills, just to kind of give you an example, the very first one that we talk about, is just simply building rapport with another couple. How do you do that? How do you make a connection? Because it's all about relationship, after all, right? And so we talk about building rapport.

Leslie: And I'll tell you what I love about that -- a lot of mentoring happens one on one, woman to woman, and that kind of thing. When the couples are working together, there is a little bit of added
vulnerability there, you know, we're feeling like, "Hey, it's our marriage here."

And so helping them build that rapport is great.

Les: Yeah, there's kind of some accountability built in.

Leslie: Yes, exactly.

Les: When you're doing this, it's kind of like a couple that does marriage seminars together. You can't get out of it, say, "Hey, we don't have any fights." "Well, what are you talking about, what did we have in the parking lot just before we came in here?" It's that kind of accountability, and that authenticity that really seems to make the difference for couples.

Bob: You know, we sat down with a couple in -- not in a formal mentoring relationship but just in a friendship that kind of had some of that iron sharpening going on, and I remember we just started off by saying, "Tell me your story."

And there is something about just telling your story …

Leslie: … yes, there is …

Bob: … where'd you grow up, the background, how'd the two of you meet? You find the connect points just in hearing the story that begins to open up all kind of avenues for deeper sharing.

Leslie: That's exactly right.

Les: Vulnerability begets vulnerability. You know, when you're around somebody that's willing to share their story, you almost have a compulsion to tell yours as well. And that's where I think that Christ comes into a situation like that and begins to minister, because we're real. We peel away all the religious cliches and all the stuff that we think we should -- kind of the "Sunday best" kind of attitude and get real.

Bob: You guys did some of this yourself with a couple you talk about in the kit -- Tom and Wendy, is that right?

Les: Yeah, and we've mentored, actually, a lot of couples, and we've been mentored by couples, as well. We still have mentors in our lives to this day.
Leslie: In fact, the impact of mentors on our lives is really what fueled this whole thing. You know, you guys have shared from your experiences. We had at least two major experiences with mentors that, I mean, you know, that would -- we would just go home and laugh. They'd describe fights they'd had, and now they've been married, you know, 20 more years, and so we think, "Okay, we're going to be okay," you know?

Dennis: That's out of the way, now we can move on to maturity.

Leslie: Exactly.

Dennis: They have no idea they're just peeling a very large onion.

Les: But it normalizes that stuff. You go, "Oh, okay, well, so this isn't all that unusual that we're having these struggles."

Leslie: Well, and shared prayer. You know, these mentors prayed for us spontaneously, unscripted. I remember sitting in the car, you know, we would be together, and they would just say, "Hey, let's pray together right now," with the couples. And, I'll tell you what -- and that's one of the skills, too, is how you approach that and do it in a very natural way together.

Les: Dennis and Lucy were one of our marriage mentor couples, and they would do that beautifully and so naturally and work as a team, and that's sometimes the challenge.

Leslie: Which is another one -- you know, here is what I love. This is a chance for you, as a mentor couple, you can kind of learn, "Here is my comfort zone, and I can toss some things over to my spouse."

Les is great at sort of going in for the very hard question. He'll ask that straightforward thing, and I'll just kind of back off.

Les: Whereas, Leslie will kind of tiptoe around that a little bit, and, you know, I'll just kind of jump in. But what she can do so much better than I, is to kind of summarize a mentoring session, kind of tie up the loose ends, and you go, "Wow, yeah, that is what we were talking about, isn't it?"

Leslie: I'm a human synthesizer.

Dennis: Give us a picture, though, of what kind of hard question you would ask a couple in a mentoring situation.
Les: Oh, I think sometimes it's very difficult to own your piece of the pie in marriage and accept responsibility. And when I see a couple that is playing the blame game and owning no -- you know, hey, it's all her, it's all him, that's when I like to kind of call it and say, "You don't see even a fraction of responsibility for what's going on?" Because, as we all know, it's a system, it's not just isolated in one person. So I'll call somebody on something like that.

Leslie: Yeah, you're good at helping people take ownership, and it might not be that they have to own the blame, but you're helping them take ownership for being part of the solution, at least, and that's a first step.

Les: I remember not too long ago we were mentoring a couple, and he was just going off on her for spending wildly with her credit card and stuff, and she really was kind of doing some things she probably shouldn't have been doing, and he was so wrought up about this, and then I called to his attention that he had just bought a new set of golf clubs and, you know, didn't have the money to do that as well.

"Well, I need those," you know, "because I've got to play golf," you know, and it goes both ways. And so those are the kinds of issues that I say let's put them out on the table and talk about it, and then reveal how we've done the very same kinds of things.

Leslie: Yeah, and I can think of some examples that are a little -- there are more layers to them, a little deeper, like some issues when it comes to how do you set boundaries with your extended family and protect your wife in the circle of your family, maybe, and still give her a little space and help her establish that we're really connected even with my mom and dad.

Les: Yeah, I remember we saw this couple not too long ago, and he said -- or she was saying, "He keeps reverting back to his single days when we go home for the holidays, and it's like I don't exist. And when we sit around with his family, and I'm not even a part of it," and Leslie looked at me and just started laughing. She said, "He did the same thing to me," and we started talking about that, and I said, "You know, it took me three years to catch on to that, three years into our marriage, and we've been married" ...

Leslie: Three to five.

Les: Oh, okay.
Bob: You were part of that club, too, weren't you?

Dennis: Absolutely. Yeah, there's a steep learning curve that occurs there. I have two points to make -- one -- and we laugh about those early years of marriage, but if you're looking for a place to target or for an age group to target for a marriage mentoring ministry, personally, I think, under 40 and specifically marriage preparation, a good mentoring of a couple starting out their relationship before they get married, then into the first two years of their marriage. I think if you can help a couple during those first five years of the marriage relationship, you can, as I said earlier, set in place habits, patterns of how to deal with conflict, how to deal with issues in the relationship so that you really can make a difference in their marriage.

And the second thing I wanted to just say here was I wanted to turn the tables a bit and ask you all to illustrate how you do this. So I'll ask you a hard question. What's been the area of greatest struggle in your relationship? Now, don't answer. The area of greatest struggle in your relationship, and then how would you take that area of greatest struggle, and how would you share that with a young couple starting out their marriage?

Les: Well, the current area of struggle for us is time, I mean, hands down. It is having quality time together and investing in our relationship. It is so easy to get distracted. And so that would be the current struggle. I wouldn't say that's the place I'm going to minister to another couple right now because we're in the midst of wrestling that one ourselves.

Leslie: But what I love about your question is really true in that the pain we go through as a couple ...

Les: Exactly, yes.

Leslie: Is really what creates the difference we make in another couple's life, it's really true, and I think that's what's fueled our passion for this in every possible way.

Les: So, give us as an example.

Leslie: I'll tell you what I think -- you know, here's the deal, we experience some major communication meltdown, and the funny thing is, you know, we know every skill possible that you're supposed to use.
We know how to do it should we choose to. It doesn't work, even for us. So we, you know, we'll be at a restaurant, and Les will say something and look over at me, and I'm crying -- his favorite moments -- date night, and I've got tears.

Les: It's like "What did I say?"

Leslie: Yeah. So, you know, we take those times where here we are not having a fight, just trying to connect, and it breaks down, and use that feeling of not always even feeling safe with each other to help a couple who may be really stuck in that. I think we've really worked hard at that.

Les: Yeah, in fact, one of the insights that I've had recently on just my whole approach to a conversation is I realize that I feel kind of threatened or I feel kind of -- well, I'll put it this way -- a conversation tends to go south for me when I feel like my time is being wasted. I talked about time earlier. But I have this certain urgency to my personality -- "Let's get it done yesterday," you know? And Leslie's like, "Let's give it time," you know?

In fact, I came home from the University not too long ago -- this is, I don't know, a few months ago, and Leslie, it was, what, maybe 9:00 at night?

Leslie: Ten.

[laughter]

Les: I came in, and she said, "Hey, the kitchen sink is backed up," and I said, "Oh, call George, he'll know what to do." She said, "Oh, it's too late." I said, "No, he loves this kind of stuff. Call him right now." She said, "No, no, no, let's just give it time," and I said, "Do you think fairies are going to come in the night and fix the sink? We've got to do something now."

And it's that sense of urgency …

Leslie: … extreme urgency that would cause you to be rude. You know, wake up a friend and -- I've got to just go on record, it was fixed in the morning. It worked.

Les: There were some fairies.

Bob: The fairies came in and did it?
Leslie: Yeah, they did. But, I mean -- and the thing about that is …

Dennis: I'd like you to send some of those fairies to our house. That never happens at our place.

Bob: There's a plumbing fairy at my place.

Dennis: Barbara and I would usually stay up arguing until about midnight, and then I'd have to call the plumber the next day.

Leslie: Yes.

Dennis: Exactly.

Leslie: I mean, you know the moment, and I think -- but I really do think it is our pain, as a couple, you know, not the raw pain, not the unfinished business, but the pain that we've been able to move through that really fuels our efforts and then, in truth, it's not even our words is what we model.

Les: And I can take that insight that I have had about this urgency and how that impacts our conversations because, of course, it's going to -- it dismantles my sensitivity to my wife when I feel this -- "Oooh, I've got to get this done now," and when I see that in another husband, I know that I can mentor him. I know I can save him years of agony.

Leslie: You can empathize.

Les: Yeah, exactly.

Bob: And that's where a lot of couples may think, "We couldn't mentor because we don't have this thing figured out" -- this time thing or this whatever. You know, half of mentoring is not giving a solution, it's just saying, "We've got it, too," and there is something about knowing that causes people to go …

Les: "Aaahh, I'm not alone."

Leslie: It's huge.

Bob: "I can deal with this -- I don't have a solution, but I'm okay that I'm there." So it's just getting together and saying, "We deal with it, too," is revolutionary.
Dennis: Your greatest lessons that you have to pass on to a younger couple in this thing called marriage and in a marriage mentoring ministry, those lessons are going to come out of your greatest struggle, and it may have taken years and, as Leslie said, they may still be a bit unfinished. They may not be all nicely neat, wrapped up. And, you know, I can imagine there are couples sitting there listening to this thinking, "We could never do that because we've had some colossal failures, like infidelity, like bankruptcy, like misuse of credit cards."

And you know what? That's the generation to whom we minister. This is a generation that is broken and you know what? We need to step into their lives out of our brokenness and show them that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is more relevant today than it's ever been.

Bob: And, as you said, it doesn't take a Ph.D. to qualify as a marriage mentor, but it might take a little bit of help, a little training, a little nudging in the right direction, and the two of you have put together a kit that is the complete resource kit for marriage mentoring. It includes a book, a DVD, actually it includes four different books -- there is "The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring," "A Training Manual for Husbands and for Wives," and a friend of mine showed me "The 51 Creative Ideas for Marriage Mentors," and I thought this was good -- he said, "You know what this showed me? It showed me that in order to be a mentor, what you really just have to be is a friend." And I thought, "That's at the heart of it."

We have these kits in our FamilyLife Resource Center, and whether somebody is a part of a local church and wants to get this started as kind of a movement in their church or maybe it's just a husband and wife who say, "We've got the time and the desire, let's do this, let's mentor some younger couples."

Go to our website, FamilyLife.com. In the middle of the home page, you'll see a red button that says "Go," and if you click that button, it will take you right to the area where there's more information about this kit, and I'll tell you what, anyone who wants to get a copy of this kit, we will send you at no additional cost as kind of a thank you gift for getting this started in your marriage or in your church, we'll send along a copy of "Simply Romantic Nights," our creative kit for couples who want to add a little romance back into their marriage.

All the details are on our website, FamilyLife.com. Click the red button that says "Go" in the middle of the screen, and that will take
you right to the page where there is more information about these resources that are available from us here at FamilyLife or call 1-800-358-6329. That's 1-800-F-as-in-family, L-as-in-life, and then the word TODAY, and someone on our team can help you get these resources sent out to you.

You know, it is always encouraging for us here at FamilyLife to hear from folks who are regular listeners to FamilyLife Today. In fact, next week on a number of these stations, we’re going to be live talking with some of our listeners and with some of the folks who help support the ministry of FamilyLife Today.

We really look at our relationship with listeners as a partnership, a three-way partnership between your local Christian radio station, FamilyLife Today, and you, as a listener, tuning in for practical, biblical help for your marriage and for your family, and we appreciate those of you who take the extra step and contact us from time to time to make a donation for our ministry.

This month when you make a donation of any amount, we want to send you as a thank you gift a copy of a book by our friends, Bill and Carolyn Wellons. It's a getaway guide for couples who want to take a weekend away to do a little strategic planning for your marriage. You can request a copy of this book when you make a donation of any amount this month. Simply go to our website, FamilyLife.com, make your donation online, and when you do, you'll come to a keycode box on the donation form. Just type the word "away" in that box, and we'll know to send you a copy of this getaway guide.

Or call 1-800-358-6329, that's 1-800-F-as-in-family, L-as-in-life, and then the word TODAY, and you can make your donation over the phone and ask for the getaway guide, and we'll know to send one of those out to you. Thanks again for your financial support of this ministry. We appreciate your partnership with us.

Well, tomorrow we're going to be back with Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott, and we're going to continue to talk about how you can help younger couples or other couples you know who might be struggling in their marriage by being a mentor. I hope you can tune in for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We'll see you back tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.