

# FamilyLife Blended®

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## Season 1, Episode 3: The Good News About Marriage

Guest: Shaunti Feldhahn

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**Ron:** From the FamilyLife® Podcast Network this is FamilyLife Blended. I'm Ron Deal. This podcast brings together timeless wisdom, practical help and hope to blended families and those who love them.

Have you ever heard somebody share a marriage or family statistic and you thought to yourself, "Is that right? That can't be right." Social statistics are everywhere and used for everything in our world, including influencing your opinions about politics and legal matters and relationships, social media, and especially your marketplace purchases.

Well, today we're going to be talking about statistics that are wrong and the urban legends that they create and how you have been negatively influenced by them and didn't even know it.

My recent conversation with Shaunti Feldhahn reveals that there is good news about the bad news about marriage, especially for blended-family couples. Shaunti Feldhahn is a social researcher, speaker, and best-selling author of multiple books included *For Women Only*.

I should add that she is a featured guest on the FamilyLife podcast, *Married with Benefits*. Season one of that podcast is all about questions every wife is asking. She will also be a featured speaker at our upcoming *Blended & Blessed®* Livestream Event on Saturday, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019. I'll share a little more about that a little later on.

Not long ago, Shaunti and I were at a gathering of people together—marriage ministry leaders. It was a lot of fun—some networking, some social time, dreaming about the future. Recently I asked her about how she feels about the field of marriage ministry and her experience at that gathering.

**Shaunti:** It was so much fun, it's so—you and I both know and anybody who is listening who cares about marriage—you know you feel there's the sense sometimes of the feeling of a little bit under siege.

**Ron:** Yes.

**Shaunti:** You know, today, and maybe just slightly. There was this incredible feeling in that group of, "Oh my goodness, I'm hanging out with 50 or 60 other thought leaders and marriage and other authors and people who run big marriage ministries,"—just being able to sit and listen to some of the new information that was coming out and to be able to sit and have dinner. How often do I get to just sit and have breakfast with Gary Thomas?

**Ron:** I'm telling you.

**Shaunti:** How often do I get to just hang out with you over s'mores? Like, what?

[Laughter]

**Ron:** That's a good day isn't it?

**Shaunti:** It was just—it was amazing. It was essentially like a giant support group for all married people. [Laughter]

**Ron:** It really was. I came back and just said to my wife, "You know, I feel rested."

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** I got to hang out with people that are friends, people that I respect, people that I've learned tremendously from—my own marriage has been impacted by as well as my ministry. One of the neat things for me was there was a younger generation there.

**Shaunti:** Yes, yes.

**Ron:** Part of what I think the event was about was to maybe introduce some of us older folks—I'm putting me in that category—not you, not you—

**Shaunti:** No, you can say that for me as well.

**Ron:** —to put us in close proximity with some of the new millennial voices that are talking about marriage. I was really encouraged by some of what they were saying / their ingenuity.

**Shaunti:** Me, too. How about those PowerPoint presentations!

**Ron:** I'm telling you—wow!

**Shaunti:** Oh, my gosh!

**Ron:** I was humbled.

**Shaunti:** Me, too!

**Ron:** How cool. They had the cool factor going for them a little bit.

**Shaunti:** Yes, they did.

**Ron:** What's the point for our listener? Well, I think the point is marriage ministry is alive and well—

**Shaunti:** —very—

**Ron:** —and there are a lot of people out in the world who are praying for you, the listener, and your marriage and your kids and the next generation and how marriage affects our society. There's people who are really spending hard energy time and they don't have much money but we're trying to do what we can in order to make a difference.

**Shaunti:** Well, the thing that was so encouraging is that you can see this arc where there is so much energy going into this—an excitement. It is by no means—even though it feels under siege—it is exploding—it's not withering / it's not pulling back / it's not retracting.

The other thing that was so cool for me is God is anointing it. Oh, I just see so many signs that, yes, there are some things that are difficult today and there are some things that are so frustrating, but God is still completely moving things forward and it's just wonderful to see that very directly in that group.

**Ron:** Marriage is *His* institution. He is committed to it.

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** It is as we say around here at FamilyLife. It's one of the things that tells us the truth about God. It gives us insights into who He is—His nature / how He lives in community and relationship. Of course, He wants marriage to exist, of course, because it teaches us about Who He is and how to live like Jesus lived. Marriage teaches you more about sacrifice than any other discipleship Bible-study program. I think it's true, right? It's where the rubber meets the road.

**Shaunti:** Every five minutes.

**Ron:** There you go.

**Shaunti:** Exactly.

**Ron:** The reason this little conversation is important is because, not only do we have good news today about marriage itself and the institution of marriage, but we have good news, I just wanted to lead with—marriage ministry has energy and creativity and ingenuity and there are new voices and new ways of impacting the world. Those two things are certainly tied together.

Now for those who don't know Shaunti, I have to tell you she's a researcher. You love research, right?

**Shaunti:** I do.

**Ron:** What's wrong with you?

**Shaunti:** I'm a nerd. [Laughs]

**Ron:** What's *wrong* with you? [Laughter]

**Shaunti:** I know it's the strangest thing. I was on the plane coming here yesterday. I walked onto the plane and discovered that Brian Goins who is your head of content development was sitting in the row behind me. The whole trip I'm working up a bunch of regression analyses that I had been working on for my next researching project. Basically, he asked the same question, "What is wrong with you—you like staring at these spreadsheets?" I'm like, "I'm sorry." [Laughter]

**Ron:** Yes, it's diagnosable, and I am a therapist so I can do that.

**Shaunti:** Yes, you can. [Laughter]

**Ron:** I have to say, I've been involved with one major research project but I was not the numbers person. I was the interpretive person.

**Shaunti:** Okay, that's still crucial.

**Ron:** It is very important. It's part of the process. But when I started looking at those numbers, my eyes just cross. I thank God for people like you who really get joy out of doing that, because the rest of us need to absorb what it means and then understand what the implications are. Then guys like me try to figure out how to communicate that and what's the practicalities for people. But it's really fun talking to somebody like you that's really done the hard work because you inform the rest of us. So thank you.

**Shaunti:** You're welcome.

**Ron:** Thank you for that.

**Shaunti:** Thanks.

**Ron:** Today we're talking about a book you wrote called *The Good News About Marriage*, in which not only did you crunch your own numbers, but you crunched everybody else's numbers.

**Shaunti:** It was a really long project.

**Ron:** Did you tell me eight years or something in the making?

**Shaunti:** Eight years.

**Ron:** And you had a team of people working with you and basically, you went out and you said, "Okay, what's the research on marriage / divorce / statistics? How many people—"

**Shaunti:** —"the church."

**Ron:** —"the church, and why do we have different messages coming from that research?" You just went in and did the really hard work of looking at all of that research and trying to pull it together and make sense out of it.

**Shaunti:** Yes, it started honestly because all of the research that I do in working with men and women and teenagers and families and marriage. I do a lot of personal interviews and I do a lot of focus groups. I was seeing this insane level of discouragement about marriage and seeing that the discouragement itself kills marriages. The lack of hope kills marriages, right?

At the same time, I was a columnist at the time for a number of years before the newspaper industry died. [Laughs] I was a newspaper columnist and trying to do a column on divorce. I wanted to correctly cite the divorce rate because everybody knew it was 50%, but maybe it was actually 47.8—who knew? I wanted the right number.

As I started looking at the numbers from the Census Bureau and the CDC and Vital Statistics and all those, the numbers I was seeing didn't match the narrative. I started to go, "Wait a minute, first of all that's crazy. But second of all, that actually matters. If that's true, if the truth doesn't match the conventional wisdom, we're killing marriages with this discouragement unnecessarily. That's a *big deal*."

The reason it took me eight years is (a) I'm not as smart as you think. My brain—my eyes roll back in my head, too, when I look at these numbers. But it is such a complicated field and there was so much there. It was like going down the rabbit hole—like I opened up just this—I thought it would be a small little project, and it just kept going and going and going—

**Ron:** —got bigger and bigger.

**Shaunti:** —and I really felt like—this is going to sound weird, but I'll say it anyway—I felt like God wouldn't let me stop. I felt this incredible weird sense that there weren't that many—pastors get discouraged by these numbers. They can't do the deep dive into the stats and maybe I could.

It took years to even understand the numbers enough to get a sense for what I was even looking at—because my eyes were rolling back in my head because it's such a complicated field. But then, once I actually started figuring what they were saying and realized there was this rabbit hole—there was so much more there—that's why I sort of felt I was supposed to keep going is there was so much there that mattered—so much.

**Ron:** Okay, so you mentioned the narrative—if we asked the average listener right now—just could call them up and say, “Hey, what's the divorce rate in the United States?”—what would they say?

**Shaunti:** Everybody would say 50%.

**Ron:** If I said, “What's the—” because we have a lot of blended family couples that are listening, “—what's the divorce rate for second marriages?”

**Shaunti:** Everybody would usually say 60%—

**Ron:** Yes.

**Shaunti:** —66%

**Ron:** And then for third marriages?

**Shaunti:** —72%

**Ron:** That's right. I have to say it was a point in my career where I quoted those very same stats.

**Shaunti:** Me, too.

**Ron:** Right.

**Shaunti:** Oh, I totally did, absolutely.

**Ron:** And it's because that's the narrative. That is what's repeated. You do see it in print and you assume that those people have done their homework. Why is that? How did we get to the place where that's—and by the way spoiler alert—that's not the truth. That's what I want our listeners to know. But before we break that down, we've got to pause and say, "How did we come to believe that?"

**Shaunti:** You know it's interesting. The way that Jeff, my husband, puts it—he said, "Fifty percent is an easy number. It's simple. The actual truth is complicated." Because, first of all, what do you mean when you say, "the divorce rate?" Like is it the number of people in a room of a thousand people who've been divorced? Is it a projection of the people who will get divorce? Is it people of this generation who are divorced or that generation? If you get married at a certain age? What is it?

There's like twenty different ways of defining it and hearing the 50% divorce rate is easy. The reason that number got started was actually a legitimate number, but it wasn't what we think it is. Back in the day, in the 1970's, when no-fault divorce started and you could get divorced just because you wanted to—you didn't have to convince a judge there was a reason.

**Ron:** Right.

**Shaunti:** The divorce rate started skyrocketing in 1972, because there was this easy trend, right? Really quickly though people realized that *that* was causing chaos. It hit a peak in 1980, and it's come down ever since then. Most people don't realize that. But what happened in the 1970s is that the demographers of the day—they looked at this trend—which was alarming—I mean this was a legitimate trend—alarming—and they projected into the future and said, "If this trend keeps up, we will hit a 50% divorce rate someday."

Even today, when you look at the baby boomers divorce rate, their divorce rate is about 45 / 40—depends on which number you look at—43%. There's a *high* percentage divorce rate for the baby boomer population because that was that group in the 1970s. The projections were that we would hit 50%. But, like I said—1980, it stopped and it started going down and the projections really never changed.

**Ron:** Let's pause right there because I do think, as you said, there's a lot of different ways to carve up the divorce rate.

**Shaunti:** Way too many.

**Ron:** Let's just focus on two pieces of that puzzle. One of them is, what we call the *actual divorce rate*, which means concrete numbers as of today, versus the *projected divorce rate*, which takes into consideration how long people live, right?

That makes sense, if you said, “Out of a thousand people how many people are divorced as of today?” —we would get a certain number. If you said, “Well now, people are going to continue living tomorrow and the next day and the next day, and some of those that are not divorced today will probably get divorced”—that’s a projection.

So demographers live between those two worlds, where they try to understand what is and what will be. What you’re saying is that 50% number came out of a period of time when the divorce rate was high, was rapid and quick, and looking at those people projecting future 50% made sense—wow, half of marriages!

**Shaunti:** It did.

**Ron:** All of a sudden, we fast-forward forty years and we still believe that that’s the divorce rate. The truth is, when you start doing your eight years of research of looking into the numbers, bottom line is the divorce rate never hit the projections.

**Shaunti:** It’s come down pretty substantially from what we can tell. The issue is—and this is what it took me a while to realize but now I’m like, “Wow, this is a big deal,” —the reality is—is that it has never hit 50%—has been nowhere close for society as a whole.

There have been groups that have gotten close to that 50% divorce rate. Like I said, the baby boomers—depending on how you define that generation—you see numbers that are in that 40 / 45%. That’s a big honking number. That’s a lot of divorces. But that’s only one generation. It’s now, if you look at all the newer generations that have come along, the divorce rate amongst those groups have dropped pretty dramatically with the millennials having the lowest divorce rate according to their age of marriage of anybody.

Suddenly it doesn’t look like we’re going to ever get anywhere close to that 50% for society as a whole and that it’s going lower and lower and lower. But people don’t know it, so they’re still discouraged.

**Ron:** Yes.

**Shaunti:** The other thing is—is that there are high-risk groups that have hit 50%. If you get married in your teenage years—

**Ron:** Yes, one of the biggest predictors right there is just being a teenager.

**Shaunti:** —being a teenager, if you get married—I think their divorce rate—if you get married as a teenager—was like 57% or something. It was *really* high. But that’s 4.7% of the population. That’s just a tiny little percentage. Looking at society as a whole and then also everybody listening to this sort of figuring where you fit—I can tell anyone who’s listening to this even in the blended family world—if you have been married more

than five years, [Laughs] your divorce rate chances just plummeted. You probably are fine.

**Ron:** Yes, one of the things I say to ministry leaders is if we can just keep blended couple married five years, the divorce rate declines rapidly—they do much better. The hard work comes in what we call the “integration years”—if you can just get through that merging process. I’m so glad you said that. Half of couples that will divorce in blended family situations will do so by year three.

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** Then it begins to taper off. If we just get people through those challenging first adjustment years, then things get better. That’s kind of true of most couples. The longer you’re together, the lower your divorce rates becomes.

**Shaunti:** And it becomes tiny. I’ll give you an example. You asked, “Why is it that we think 50%?” One of the other reasons we think 50% is that we don’t hear all the good news regularly, because it doesn’t make the news really. I saw an example of this really directly when I was in the middle of the research process. I had already seen the trend that—let’s just say there’s some big study that comes out and it’s found ten conclusions and eight of them are positive, and two of them are negative—guess what you’re going to hear on the news, right?

**Ron:** Sure.

**Shaunti:** An example of this—there was a front-page *New York Times* above-the-fold headline, *Divorce is Contagious*. It was based on the study in Framingham, Massachusetts. This is a representative American town and this is a town in which actually they’ve have this massive longitudinal study for years since 1941.

Because they’ve done this since 1941—all these different waves—they’ve been able to look at everything under the sun, not just marriage stuff—but like everything. They had found in one of the marriage trends that they had found is that if you know people in your friend group who’ve been divorced, it’s become more normative—you’re more likely to, statistically, have a risk of divorce. So divorce is contagious.

But also, the good news was if your friends haven’t gotten divorced at high rates, you’re less likely to get divorced. The lack of divorce and staying married is contagious, too. I thought, “Ok, that sort of makes sense. That’s good.” I looked at the study and my head exploded, because when I actually went back—because I felt like my job was to go look at the actual study, right?

**Ron:** Right.

**Shaunti:** —not just the news reports because of this trend of the fact that they'll focus on the bad stuff. Guess—just take a guess--you probably remember this from the book but—what was the divorce rate in Framingham, Massachusetts—this representative American town?

**Ron:** I don't remember. What was it?

**Shaunti:** 9.5%

**Ron:** [Laughs]

**Shaunti:** Why was that not above the fold in the *New York Times—Representative American Town has 9.5% Divorce Rate*? The reason was is that the higher divorce rates are truly higher risk factors. Again, you get married at very young ages, which happens more in the south than the north, for example, you have a higher divorce rate. If you are slightly more educated, you have a lower divorce rate.

If you dropped out of high school, you have a higher divorce rate. Framingham, Massachusetts was just a normal American town where people tended to get married over the age of 25, there was a relatively reasonable number of people who had college degrees and high school degrees who were, I guess you'd sort of say, a little more—they weren't highly educated—but they were more that direction. Because of that—just those two factors—they had a 9.5% divorce rate. That to me is what people need to know.

**Ron:** Yes, but we don't want to tell good news. I just have to pause for a second here because I think sometimes we in ministry are guilty of this. We share what sells. Okay, in the market place *sex* sells, and in ministry *fear* sells.

**Shaunti:** Oh, interesting.

**Ron:** You know, we want a headline that says, "Watch out! The devil's on the prowl, and here's the bad stuff that's going to happen to you unless you come to our Sunday morning Bible class on this subject."

**Shaunti:** Interesting.

**Ron:** We kind of sell that way. The news does for sure and newspapers do for sure. Twitter does for sure. Fear sells. Again, like but what's the balance of the conversation? Now in a minute I want us to come back to some of the details. Somebody's listening right now, and they're going, "I don't know. Shaunti may be off her rocker. I've heard this 50% thing from my pastor a hundred times"—and you have and—"I'm not so sure"—so we're going to really look at how you got to these conclusions in a minute.

**Shaunti:** Sure, absolutely.

**Ron:** But before we get there, here's why this conversation is important to you, the listener. Shaunti, what's the narrative / what's the message that gets communicated when we say half of all marriages end in divorce? I believe the narrative about the statistic *is* what's discouraging and the narrative, I think, is, "What's the point?—"

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** "—It's all going to end. Half of marriages." That's the tone and the attitude that is, "Gosh, the world's going to hell in a handbasket," and "Why get married?" So many people today are just not getting married and they'll justify it with, "Well,—"

**Shaunti:** "—what's the point?"

**Ron:** "—what's the point? It's a big risk getting married. Half of marriages—I'll just stay where it's safe on this side of the fence."

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** The other one I hear is, "We're struggling in our marriage, so we're defeated anyway." It's kind of this, "Why try because it just seems to fail? Really, we're normal if we fail."

**Shaunti:** Correct.

**Ron:** Oh, my goodness!

**Shaunti:** "Most of the other people can't make it either."

**Ron:** That's right. "So it's really not us. We just have to embrace it—don't dig in and work hard and try to save this thing."

**Shaunti:** What happens in all of our hearts with anything that's discouraging and anything where you need to work at it—and it's especially crucial in marriage—we've seen this so often—I'm sure you have too—is that you get to this point where you're thinking, "If the ship is going to sink anyway, why bother working so hard to bail it out? It is better to just use all that energy to escape the wreck intact."—which is actually logical. If the ship is going to sink and there's nothing you can do about it, that's actually true.

But the reality is that in the vast majority of cases, there is something you can do about it. There was a big study that was done by Scott Stanley and some other really, really excellent researchers—I loved their work—where they actually found that the people in *the most dire* situations in their marriage—the worst possible, almost-divorce situations—if those people stuck it out for five years, 80% of those couples were still married five years later. That 80% of them—they had turned a corner.

Now that study was sort of in some of the highfalutin academic demographer circles. It was ridiculed as the “spontaneous remission study”—“Oh yes, your marriage problems just go away.” Actually, it’s funny, because based on the research that Jeff and I have done on all of these relationship things over the years, we’ve found that most of the things that cause marriage problems are the little things and you’re hurting each other without intending to.

Once you know certain things about each other and you try a couple things differently and you are aware of some things and you get some of the help like what you guys do in giving people some equipping and here’s how you can handle things just a little bit differently—suddenly you can see some really big radical changes from some fairly simple adjustments. If that is true, it makes perfect sense that 80% of those marriages would still be there five years later. Actually, 80% of those marriages—what they found—is happy five years later.

**Ron:** You know what I love about that is—I mean that applies to my marriage, too. Nan and I have more than once in our 32 years together had moments where we needed outside help. Sometimes there were internal struggles in our relationship. Sometimes it was an external stress on our relationship but we made it through. We rode it out. We had some very hard periods of our marriage. If you give up on the idea that’s it’s supposed to last—that it’s meant to last—that there’s value in it lasting—

**Shaunti:** Right and that you’re going to get through it and be happy.

**Ron:** Exactly—that there’s something on the other side worth fighting for—well, then you just kind of give up on doing the hard work. I think it’s important to say, “There’s really good stuff on the other side of hard.”

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** We just to have be committed to that process. What we’re saying here is that the narrative about the 50% divorce rate stat is discouraging people / it’s limiting them / it sends them down the road of, “Well, what’s the point?” so they lose their energy and their desire to do hard.

Even beyond that, you quote in your book, *The Good News About Marriage*, Dr. Scott Stanley, who’s one of our buddies and favorite researchers out there in the marriage world, and he says this, “Some of the myths today about the risks of marriage lead to very bad behaviors that decrease the odds of a marriage succeeding.”

It’s not just—I get discouraged about the idea or the institution of marriage so I avoid it all together—if I’m married, I just give up. If I’m married, Scott says, that negative attitude about it leads me to then make choices and do things that make my marriage worse. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Shaunti:** Exactly. It's interesting, one of the things when I started seeing not just that the regular first marriage stats were better than we thought but that remarriage stats were better than what people thought. You know there's differences of opinions on what those are but that they're better than what we think.

**Ron:** Right.

**Shaunti:** It's interesting—I was sharing this with one of my best friends. She had been a single mom for ten or twelve years—difficult, difficult situation and was just about to get remarried. Her daughter and my daughter are best friends. She was just about to get remarried and she had three kids and when she saw what I was finding in the statistics, she kind of—it was interesting—she eventually sent me an email. I actually asked her to read a first draft of the chapter on remarriage.

She said, “First of all, it's blowing my mind. But secondly, I realized I was about to approach this new marriage all wrong.” She said, “In my mind, I love this guy—he's a strong Christian man—he's amazing—he's going to make a great step-dad to my kids. But knowing”—this is what she said—“knowing—” in quotes, “—that there's a 60% chance of me getting divorced again from him, it would be foolish for me to not take steps to protect myself. I have to protect my children.”

She said, “I was going to have a bank account on the side and sort of have this sort of self-protective thing in my heart and in my finances, because knowing that it probably wouldn't work, I would be foolish not to.” She said, “Knowing that statistically I would be unusual if it didn't work—if the second marriage didn't work—knowing that that would be unusual, I can be all in. I can *expect* it to work. I don't have to protect myself because,” she said, “protecting yourself like that builds a wall.”

**Ron:** It does.

**Shaunti:** And causes the problems you're trying to protect yourself from.

**Ron:** The irony there is more research—the one study I did participate in with Dr. David Olsen—we wrote a book called, *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*—one of the things that we found is that guardedness and the fear of another breakup—which is exactly what your friend had going in—because she thought 60% of all stepfamily couples are going to divorce—that that guardedness and fear leads to negativity that cascades throughout the relationship—that actually does contribute to a less satisfying marriage and higher risks of divorce. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy

But when you go all in, you begin to do the things that love would call you to do, and that is a game changer. Our listeners need to get that—it is a game changer—

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** —when you say, “I’m all in,” you stop self-protecting. Here’s a way I like to say it, “When I’m protecting me from you, there cannot be an us.”

**Shaunti:** Okay, I have to write that down.

**Ron:** Are you going to write that? “When I’m protecting me from you, there cannot be an us.” I limit our ability to find intimacy / to fully engage one another / to give everything that we need to give. There are moments where marriage is hard. There’s great joy in marriage relationship but it always requires more of me than I want to give.

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** That’s the discipleship aspect of marriage.

**Shaunti:** Right.

**Ron:** When I get to that moment, if I’m all in, I find a way to do the sacrifice, to look deeply at myself or to love the way Jesus is calling me to love. But if I’m guarded, then I find the easy way out, I do the self-protective thing, and that is a game changer on the direction of your relationship.

Now, at one point when you were in the middle of this project, you called me and we talked. I don’t know if you remember this or not.

**Shaunti:** I totally 100% remember this.

**Ron:** Well, first of all, I need to say thank you for that phone call because you ended up in the course of this dialogue and you telling me about what you were doing—that I just happened to be doing the revised and expanded update edition of *The Smart Stepfamily*, and I changed my numbers—

**Shaunti:** Yes, you did.

**Ron:** —because of that conversation. I want to thank you for that.

**Shaunti:** You know what, I just have to thank you because not everybody did that I called. I was shocked by what I was finding and felt like it was so important. There were some leaders who didn’t want to hear that the numbers were better than what they had been telling their people. Partly because of that dynamic—like, “Well then there would be less reason for the existence of our marriage ministry.” And I’m like, “Wait!”

**Ron:** Yes, “Wait a minute.”

**Shaunti:** Just because the number isn’t 50 and it’s more like maybe 25 or 30% of a divorce rate that’s still a *huge* number.

**Ron:** Right, that's millions of people.

**Shaunti:** That's millions of people.

**Ron:** You're not going to sell less books.

**Shaunti:** You're giving people hope. But you were one of the intellectually honest ones. You were one of the ones who said, "Yeah, I need to take my own look at this, but yeah."

**Ron:** I appreciate that. We should influence each other. If people read *The Smart Stepfamily* today it's got some Shaunti fingerprints on it. I appreciate that so much.

When we talked, I said to you, "Now, Shaunti, you are walking into some deep waters with all of this. There's going to be a bunch of academics that come at you hard if you come back and say the divorce rate is not 50%. You better talk to everybody who's doing the research / has done the research and not just comment on them but you ought to actually speak to them and run this by them and get their feedback and hear more of the background that went into their research."

**Shaunti:** You gave me a list.

**Ron:** I did.

**Shaunti:** Because I had been talking to other people. You were like, "Here are the people that are in the stepfamily world. You need to talk to these people."

**Ron:** That's right. To your credit you talked to those folks, you talked to other folks and you went in and dug deep. I think that's huge. The listener who's sitting here going, "Man this just can't be true. I've heard this my entire life,"—just know that you went and you actually talked to those researchers and academics.

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** Were there any interesting stories that came out of your conversations?

**Shaunti:** Well, the funniest one—because this is one of the most quoted citations for the 60% and 72% divorce rates—*Psychology Today*.

**Ron:** Which I should tell the listener is a popular magazine written by psychologists, but yet it's meant for the public.

**Shaunti:** Correct. It is supposed to be heavily based on research. It's supposed to be something that the public can trust. I'm sure a lot of their articles can be trusted, right? It

just happened to be that there was this one article that was *heavily* quoted in this world of the divorce rate that you find on a lot of websites and a lot of magazines and a lot of books quoting this article that quotes Dr. Jennifer Baker, who is a very well-known researcher at the Forest Institute in Missouri.

It quotes Jennifer Baker as saying that there is a 50% first marriage divorce rate—60% second marriage—72% third marriage. A lot of people had used that so we contacted Dr. Baker and said, “Can we get ahold of your study so that we can look at it?” Because that was what we had been doing on all of them was looking at the actual study, not the news reports. She wrote us back an email in all capital letters. [Laughter]

**Ron:** —all caps?

**Shaunti:** —all caps—the whole email and it was one line, “THAT’S NOT ME. I NEVER SAID THAT. I’VE BEEN TRYING TO GET THEM TO TAKE MY NAME OFF THAT WEBSITE FOR YEARS.”

**Ron:** Wow!

**Shaunti:** It was an urban legend.

**Ron:** Wow!

**Shaunti:** I mean, literally, I don’t know where it came from but literally somebody quoted Jennifer Baker. *Psychology Today* picked it up, didn’t, I guess, check to see whether she had actually said that, and it’s been out there for years as an urban legend.

**Ron:** That was all pre-social media. Let me just say to our listener. Today it’s even worse the stuff you will hear, what it means, and the implications of it. I think there is more bad news about marriage and the institution of marriage than ever before. There’s good news about the bad news about marriage—it’s not true.

Yes, there are marriages that end in divorce. It is a lower number than most people—so what are the numbers? I think 31% is a current divorce rate—an actual divorce rate—something like that. Basically, if we stopped right now in time and said how many people who are divorced that have ever been married—somewhere around 30%.

**Shaunti:** —it just depends. You can make a case for 25. You can make a case for 35—but there are some numbers that sort of circle around that 30%—and it is falling because the highest risk marriages today are the baby boomer generation. That generation is passing away and the younger generation marriages that are coming on board have dramatically lower divorce rates.

If the baby boomers—by the time they had been married 10 years, they already had a relatively high divorce rate because of that 1970’s thing. The millennials—by the time

they'd been married—those who have been married 10 years—have a much, much lower divorce rate. The population that's coming in that is replacing the high divorce rates with the low divorce rates—that societal overall number is falling.

**Ron:** And part of that with the millennials, I just read recently, has to do with marrying later—they're more stabilized in their life / career / home—some of that kind of stuff—taking longer to marry. There's different factors that contribute to that. It's not necessarily that they're better at marriage than other generations and that's why they have a lower divorce rate. But the demographics around their life help support longevity in marriage.

**Shaunti:** Well, the demographics are huge. This is one thing that's very little understood. People are like, "People just aren't getting married as much and the ones who—you're losing all the highest risk people." Yes, but there was a big study that actually dug into that quantitatively—what is responsible for the decline in the divorce rates?

And this was a lady who did this—her PhD at Harvard on this—then has gone on to continue to do this and has found that—I think it's 66% of the decline in the divorce rate is directly tied to people getting marriage at older ages—period.

**Ron:** Age.

**Shaunti:** That is literally the age of marriage is by far the largest contributor. However, another big contributor amongst millennials and now generation Z—which is the next generation that is *just* now coming to the age of marriage—another big contributor is actually intent and purpose and sort of seeing chaos from the baby boomer generation.

**Ron:** They've seen a lot of that.

**Shaunti:** They've seen it and they don't want it.

**Ron:** Right.

**Shaunti:** So they're going to be more purposeful, and that is actually something to applaud.

**Ron:** Yes, absolutely. When we say age, there's so many ways we could chase this. The age of a person—is it just age or does the represent a maturing process? It's probably all of that.

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** Education—more stable in life—you know who you are a little bit—more self-aware. All of that comes with age. That shows you the difficulty in trying to understand

what causes divorce / what helps marriages last. That's why we spend so much time pouring through research.

Okay, so about a third—and let's be clear about this—about a third of all marriages have currently divorced. If you break that down—and by the way, that's not projected—just for our listener to keep that square—what's the projected divorce rate?

**Shaunti:** Well, this is the problem.

**Ron:** This is where some of the arguments come in.

**Shaunti:** This is where the arguments come in. The demographers—and by the way, you know I disagree with that third—I think it's closer to 25%—but that's less material, right—The projected thing is the real interesting one [Laughs] because the demographers—and I've talked to almost all of them now—because it took me a long time to understand what I was seeing and so they were helpful. They were amazing. They dug in and helped me understand everything.

Their projections are built on algorithms / they're built on models. They are still largely projecting a 40-50% divorce rate—which intellectually I don't see how they get there until I look at their number sets that they are basing those models on—because I just don't agree with that number so I look and I go, “Why is that so different from—? How could it possibly go up when the trend is down? I don't get that.”

I looked at the models that they were actually doing and most—not all—most of those models are based on numbers from the CDC—this huge study which was actually really, really good-quality data. I can see why they *wanted* to use it. It's called the *National Survey of Family Growth*.

**Ron:** From the Center for Disease Control.

**Shaunti:** From the Center for Disease Control. It is constantly added to, and it is a very large number and high-quality data. It's very tempting for a researcher to use it for projections. The problem is when we actually went granular and looked at who they were surveying, the *National Survey of Family Growth* is primarily a study of fertility. It was primarily surveying people who got married at extremely young ages. So suddenly you take a population—

**Ron:** The data is a little skewed.

**Shaunti:** —that's highly skewed. I think 30-something percent of the sample was married before the age of twenty. That's 4.7% of the population and 30% of the sample. You're going to get skewed data. It was something like 75% were married before the age of 25. Now the average age of marriage in the country today for women is 27, and for men, is 29. That—as we talked about—that's a much more protective number.

Suddenly, you see that they're doing all of this amazing work projecting based on a bad data set. No wonder they're projecting a 40-50% divorce rate. I think honestly, if they were to change the underlying sample, I think that their projections would be dramatically different.

**Ron:** So we just went down into the weeds.

**Shaunti:** Yes, sorry about that. [Laughter] Everybody's eyes are rolling back in their heads as they're listening.

**Ron:** This is why we love you—because people like me can read this stuff but I really don't want to try to chase it and get my head around it. Thank you for doing all the hard work.

**Shaunti:** That was an explanation for those people that care because there are those people that really care.

**Ron:** It matters.

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** If you're a listener and you're kind of skeptical on this whole conversation—that's the stuff that matters—that's where you have to go if you really want to get honest about all of this.

Again, keep in mind the importance of our dialogue today is—if the message about a 50% divorce rate is, "What's the point?"—*discouragement*—"We're just like everybody else if we get divorced, it's all okay." Then there's a new narrative when we say, "No, no, no, no, no, that's not right—not nearly that many marriages fail. Marriage as an institution is not a bad thing."

So many people are afraid today. That's why cohabitation is up so much. It's this, "I don't want to go there because I lose my options / I get pinned in / I'm stuck / I'm going to end up in a bad spot like my parents and my grandparents. No, I don't want that to be me." That's understandable—that fear.

**Shaunti:** It is.

**Ron:** Sometimes it's based on experience and sometimes it's based in a myth.

**Shaunti:** But the answer isn't what they think it is, right? The answer is to protect yourself and not go there—as opposed to—if it's based on a myth first and far more marriages are strong and happy than you realize, and in fact, the vast majority of marriages are strong and happy for a lifetime—okay, that's the vast majority—then taking the risk and being all in, like we were talking about, that makes you very likely to

be in that category. You would be unlikely—if you were *all in*—you would be *unlikely* to not have a strong, happy marriage for a lifetime.

**Ron:** Let's talk about Christians for a minute.

**Shaunti:** Yes.

**Ron:** A little while ago, I asked you when you talked to the researchers, were there any surprising stories. There's a number out there—people have heard—I've heard it in church I don't know how many times—that the divorce rate among Christians is exactly the same—came from a study by George Barna and the Barna Group. Did you talk to them?

**Shaunti:** Oh yes.

**Ron:** What's the story?

**Shaunti:** It turns out that that's a big misunderstanding. It's actually based on a belief that Barna found something he didn't actually find. We hear pastors--and I used to say this okay—I'm not knocking pastors—I used to say this as well—the rate of divorce is the same in the church. It's not. Barna didn't find that it was the same in the church because he wasn't studying people in the church.

When we looked at his methodology, what Barna was studying—and he wasn't trying to study the church—he was studying belief systems—so people who you call them on the phone and they say they think a Christian way or a Jewish way or an atheist way—those people have the same divorce rates. But he specifically excluded whether they went to church from the analysis.

I partnered with Barna and I bought that same data set—the same one that everybody thinks he found that. We re-ran all the numbers but with that one factor added in of—“Was the person in church last week?” He wasn't trying to study it. That was the only factor we could use as a temporary—okay using that same data set, if you run the numbers differently what does it show?

We found, if the person was in church last week, the divorce rate dropped by 27%. That was a study that wasn't even trying to get at that. When you look at the studies that have been trying to get at, what is the divorce rate amongst people who attend church regularly—where church is a part of their life or their faith is a part of their life?—the divorce rate plummets, anywhere from that 25% range to 50%.

**Ron:** Has there been any other research maybe even something recently?

**Shaunti:** Yes. There was a Harvard study that found that the divorce rate drops 47%.

**Ron:** When they are engaged in some activity?

**Shaunti:** —just going to church.

**Ron:** What's the meta-message here is living the Christian life is different than just claiming a belief. Basing your life and having activity in your life that is representative of your faith—things that we could measure like prayer / things like attending church as an outward sign of something that's going on inside you—helps us distinguish between people who would just call themselves Christians and people who actually try to live a Christian life. When we do that the divorce rate comes down considerably from those who don't hold that faith and don't live based on that faith. Is that right?

**Shaunti:** Yes, it is true, and just so you know, Ron,—I think you already knew this—but amongst demographers, when you talk about the divorce rate, you're going to hear everything under the sun. There's a lot of controversy—nobody agrees—whatever. On this, there's no controversy. Every demographer knows that this is true. It's just that every pastor doesn't and every Christian doesn't. They've all been unnecessarily discouraged.

**Ron:** Here's my commentary on this. I mean tell me what you think. It seems to me, first of all, the divorce rate among people of faith should be lower.

**Shaunti:** Yes, one would hope.

**Ron:** One would hope. If Jesus offers us anything that makes a difference in our lives and we actually obey and follow, it should make a difference, and sure enough, it does. I love that even secular research has supported that. What we do have to talk a little bit about is the difference between belief and activity, right? The difference between—somebody used to say just cause you're in a garage doesn't make you a car.

**Shaunti:** It's a great statement.

**Ron:** It is.

**Shaunti:** It's true.

**Ron:** There are people who go to church and are kind of spectator Christians. That's really not--they're not interested in actually living the Christian life. They're just wanting to be around it and punch their clock and go to church. But when conviction moves us towards obedience, it does make a difference in our relationships.

Are there things that you would recommend to couples that they do that, that again, are outwardly signs of the conviction in their heart—praying together?

**Shaunti:** All of those—listen—all of those things are going to matter. There's no one magic bullet, because if you look at every conceivable research study, there's all over the map—like what matters the most.

I don't know that there is one thing that matters the most. The key is essentially, "Are you trying to listen to God and put Him at the center of your marriage?" I mean because that will mean for some couples praying together. I would love to pray with Jeff. He's an amazing guy. He's a leader in our family. He's the spiritual leader.

Praying together just isn't something that he is as interested in doing on a regular basis. It's just not him. He prays personally and we do pray together when there's something going on—we'll just stop everything and pray out loud at our kitchen table. But it's not like, "Let's have our private devotion time every morning." That's just not him.

That's us but there are some couples—that that is them. That's awesome. Are there other things? Yes, individually—I would say—if you're trying to keep your own relationship with the Lord front and center and trying to put it in your marriage relationship in some way, then you are going to try to put the other person first / you're going to try to ask the Lord, "Help I want to kill him." [Laughter]

**Ron:** Yes, that's right.

**Shaunti:** You're going to do things that are different than somebody who doesn't have the power of the Holy Spirit working in you and working on your conscience and helping you and giving you strength when you don't have it in your own self.

**Ron:** By the way, I do think it's important that we get the direction of this right. One of my colleagues here at FamilyLife, Mike Findley, shared with me recently—he just put this very poignantly—he said, "You know, God didn't give us faith for marriage. He gave us marriage for faith."

**Shaunti:** That's good.

**Ron:** Marriage is helping us become more Christ-like. There's nothing wrong with saying, "Boy, I want to be like Jesus and what's my personal walk with Jesus and how's that impacting my marriage," but marriage is not the ultimate there. The ultimate is to become more Christ like / to follow in the footsteps of our Savior.

Even the hard things in marriage are shaping us / are molding us / refining us into the image of Christ. It invites us. It's a two-way street. You know the hard things in my marriage—I have to go, "What am I going to do? This is driving me crazy."

I have this little conversation with the Lord. "Okay what have You told me to do? I need to look first at myself. I need to wrestle with who I am and how I've been in this situation. How do I bring some truth and love to what I'm really feeling? How do I present my

struggle with what's going on with my marriage to my wife in a way that's palatable and gentle and patient rather than full of anger and rage and retaliation?" That whole internal dialogue with God is teaching me to be like Christ and at the same time helping me be a husband.

**Shaunti:** Well, it is going to come out as the fruit of the Spirit, right?

**Ron:** Yes.

**Shaunti:** For me, I know myself—you've known me for quite a few years—I am a pretty strong, opinionated personality.

**Ron:** Really? I would've never guessed.

**Shaunti:** You would've never guessed. Neither would Jeff. [Laughter]

My personality is such that in my own self—if Jeff says something that hurts my feelings—oh boy, he's going to know about it. Like, I am going to come back with a biting comment. I'm going to say, "Well that's all you know." I'm going to say something that is going to hurt his feelings back basically.

But one of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. That, for me, is an example of that marriage tension—whatever's going on with me and Jeff—being used by God by the power of the Holy Spirit to help me to just shut up and not say something that five minutes later, I'm going to go, "Darn, that hurt his feelings and it just put us on a downward spiral and there was no point." That's a fruit of the Spirit that God is trying to build in me for every area and he's using my marriage to do it.

**Ron:** You've been listening to my conversation with Shaunti Feldhahn. I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended.

We'll hear one last thought from Shaunti in just a minute. Do you remember when she was talking about the newspaper headline that said, "Divorce Is Contagious"? What they actually found in this study is that if you have a high number of people in your friend group who get divorced the odds of you divorcing go up.

She also noted that the same research found that staying married is contagious as well. If your friend group has a low divorce rate, the odds of you divorcing goes down. Now, I know this is just one factor in determining the course of your marriage, but let's talk about friends for just a minute. First Corinthians 15:33 tells us, "Do not be deceived, bad company ruins good morals."

Choosing the peer group that you hang out with—a peer group for your marriage—really matters. Who you hang around influences the direction of your marriage. Through the years, Nan and I—we've have had many couple friends in our life. So many of them

have been positive influences on us as people but really on our marriage as well—just doing life with other couples / walking through a similar season of life together / talking and struggling together about what’s going on with our kids and our life and our marriage and our finances.

All of that helps me find inspiration to keep going on. Helps us make better choices. We look back and we can easily see the influence those people have had on our lives. The choices we make in friends really matters. Now sometimes it’s just social and sometimes it’s a formal ministry like a small group. You get involved with a small group of people that you meet with on a regular basis and that becomes a positive influence on you and you likely on them.

As you seek to grow your family, I want to encourage you be part of a small group or a class / a Sunday school / a community of other couples where you can learn from one another and encourage each other. It really makes a difference in your walk with Christ.

Shaunti’s going to share a final thought in just a minute. If you’d like more information about our guest you can find it on our show notes. Check it out on the FamilyLife Blended page at [FamilyLife.com/podcasts](http://FamilyLife.com/podcasts).

I do want you to know that we want to hear from you. Your feedback matters a lot to us. Positive online reviews—those are *really* appreciated. Subscribe to this podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download your podcast. Just search FamilyLife Blended with Ron Deal and remember to look at the show notes for links to additional resources.

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I know you’re invested in your marriage and your family so be sure to check out our one-day livestream event called *Blended & Blessed*, specifically designed for couples in blended families. It will be Saturday, April 27th. You can join us live in Minneapolis for this event, or you can just join us on your smartphone or your tablet or go with a group of couples to your church and sit down and enjoy the day together.

You can watch it as a couple in the privacy of your own home for just \$19, or your church can host a bunch of couples for \$99. I’ll be there and so will Shaunti Feldhahn and radio personality and pastor, Chris Brooks, and popular speakers, Dave and Ann Wilson and more. Delivered right to you wherever you are, this experience offers practical help and encouragement for your blended family. I hope you’ll join us for this one-of-a-kind event. Learn more at [Blended&Blessed.com](http://Blended&Blessed.com).

Now here's a final word from Shaunti:

**Shaunti:** Marriage *does* become *amazing*. It is an amazing institution. Just because you've had a broken situation before—not everybody listening to this would have had that I know—some people had great marriages and a spouse passed away—but if they're in that situation where they're in the next season and it feels weird sometimes—I know that I've heard that so many times and there's this question of, “Can it be amazing?” Yes! That is God's *design* for marriage. It's not always going to happen that way because we're broken but that *is* God's design.

**Ron:** Next time, Ronnie and Lamar Tyler are going to join us. Think about this—what would you do if your family, your extended family, is telling you that you didn't need your new husband?

**Ronnie:** “You were better off. You could do this alone. Why did you have to get married? You own the house. You have a nice job. You could take care of your kids, you know, alone.”

**Ron:** That's Ronnie and Lamar Tyler of BlackandMarriedwithKids.com next time on FamilyLife Blended.

I'm Ron Deal. Thanks for listening. Thanks to our legacy partners for making this podcast possible.

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