

Married With Benefits

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Season 1, Episode 9: Why Does My Husband Choose Video Games Over Me?

Featured Host: Shaunti Feldhahn
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Brian: From the FamilyLife Podcast Network this is Brian Goins. I'm your host of Married With Benefits. The podcast that is devoted to helping you love the one you're with by tackling some of the toughest issues in marriage and discover the real benefits of saying, "I do."

This season has been great. We've formed this secret society of women and one token guy daring to answer the questions that we know you're thinking, but just aren't sure who to ask. The question we going to ask our featured host today is, "Why does my husband choose video games over me? Shouldn't he have stopped that after high school?"

Today the token guy has grown to two.

Shaunti: Absolutely, I'm excited.

Brian: As always I'm here with Shaunti Feldhahn. I'm excited because we needed to find somebody who was a video game expert, who was not me. My sons, both Palmer and Gibson, love to play Fortnite. That's what they're into.

Shaunti: So does my son.

Brian: Luke? He likes to play—

Shaunti: Absolutely.

Brian: Those of you who are wives, who are moms, probably know this, but you also may be wives of husbands. I know that I have plenty of issues, but video gaming is not one of mine. So we brought on Ryan, who is one of our key content strategists here, and has helped us a lot with the Shaunti podcast.

So Ryan, is this something that you deal with? I should say, that your wife deals with?

Ryan: Yes. First of all I should say I feel like I'm on the witness stand right now.

Brian: Yes, it does look like that.

Shaunti: Yes, you pretty much are.

Ryan: Let's find someone who plays so many video games that they're worthy of being on the podcast.

(Laughter)

Brian: You did brag that you're the guy in the building—nobody plays more video games except maybe one other guy than you.

Ryan: Yes, there might be two of us, and it's not usually something that you'd even brag about, but—

Brian: No.

Ryan: I don't know. It's a lot of fun, so you could get into the why I play, but that's not why we're here.

Brian: No. We're not. We want to hear a little about your story. Shaunti, do you get this question a lot?

Shaunti: I do. It's actually, believe it or not, one of my close friends got a divorce because of this.

Brian: Because of video games?

Shaunti: Yes. Video games and television. Her husband, she felt like he literally ignored her, in a literal sense--would come home and vanish.

Brian: I would love to know how many wives are dealing with this.

Shaunti: I don't think statistically it's the majority, but it is, I think, a fairly large number, and most of us know multiple people who deal with this. So all of us as women are curious about this question.

Brian: Yes, I'm sure. Ryan, just give us context. How old are you? How long have you been married?

Ryan: I've been married since 2014. We have a young 2½ year old.

Shaunti: How does your wife feel about your gaming?

Ryan: It has been a long conversation that we've navigated throughout our marriage. There has been tension at times, and there has been togetherness at times. It just really depends on where we are in our marriage and our relationship; where I am in my stresses and why I'm playing video games, how I'm using it.

Because at the end of the day, if you're a guy, you can play for fun. Anyone can play for fun, sure, but when it becomes an escape, when it becomes something greater than your spouse or your family or your job, it becomes like any other addiction. It's the most important thing. And if it is the most important thing, it's an idol.

Brian: So did she know that you have a love for video games before you got married?

Ryan: Oh yes, absolutely. And she has two younger brothers, and they play video games, so obviously early on when we were dating, I could connect with her brothers via video games, and we still play to this day. Yes, she knew that I played video games. I mean, what young guy in their 20s doesn't play video games? I feel like it's pretty pervasive, but it wasn't really an issue.

Brian: It wasn't an issue because you were dating.

Ryan: It wasn't an issue because we were dating, and it wasn't an issue because I wasn't playing that much. One interesting thing about this is I actually bought a new console in the middle of our marriage. We were about two years in, and I wanted to play and connect even more with her brothers and guys that were in our small group.

So I went and bought an Xbox. It was Black Friday, I went out to Walmart, got it and brought it home.

Brian: Did you have to battle other people for it?

Ryan: No. It was pretty—well, you know we live in Little Rock, Arkansas, so there's not huge lines waiting outside Walmart, anymore at least. So I went and bought it, brought it home, of course I played all night.

Shaunti: And how did she feel about that?

Ryan: Oh, she thought it was pretty silly. For her, you look at the joy and excitement of just the comradery and just the competition that guys have—that need to release some kind of competitive energy or spirit, the need to dominate or win over someone else. I certainly have that. If it's not video games, it's going to be tennis, because I played competitive tennis for a long time. Then when we had Elliott that had to stop.

Shaunti: Yes. I'm sure there are many women who are thinking *yes, but we have a 2½ year old, and this has to stop.*

Brian: Yes.

Ryan: Exactly.

Brian: And doesn't it seem like a childish thing?

Shaunti: Well, here's the thing. For us as women, yes, it does. And there are plenty—don't get me wrong—there are plenty of women who enjoy video games, too. But from what I can tell, having done all these studies over the years, it's a pretty small number that get into it in the same way that men do. I think it is because, for men, it actually releases testosterone, it releases adrenaline. There are the endorphins that come—

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And so it feels good and it sort of gives you that kick and that surge, and that kind of kick and that surge comes for women when we're having deep conversations. So suddenly we have two competing needs here.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: He has the need to go sit in front of his console and game with somebody else on the other side of the country. I have the need to have a deep conversation with the back of his head? I need to be talking to him, and this is setting up so many people for this *why does he not care about me, why does he just vanish?*

So one of the things that I wanted to mention that we have seen as we've talked to guys like Ryan—and I'm curious what you're going to say about this—is they all seem to say “When I come home, I feel like I almost deserve and I need something that gives me some fun. I've been working all day. I need to empty my brain. I need to be able to—“

Brian: “I need to escape.”

Shaunti: “I need to escape, I need a brain break.” Maybe it's not gaming. Maybe it's sitting on the couch and watching football. It could be whatever it is. That's something for us as women to recognize. That's legitimate too. Wouldn't there be times that we would want a brain break? And of course I can hear every woman saying, “Yes.”

Brian: Yes.

Shaunti: “When I’ve been with the kids all day and he comes home, I want my break, and I don’t get it because he vanishes into the gaming room.” But realistically, yes, we both probably need it.

It doesn’t say anything about his love for you, until maybe it does get to that, well, he just can’t stop himself, like with my friend whose husband literally would spend all of his time not talking to her and gaming instead.

Brian: Now, would that be for you? Would you come home after work and that would be the first thing you’d want to do is start playing video games? I’m thinking now, especially with a 2½ year old, with a baby.

Ryan: It’s evolved, for sure. Pre-kids, I would come home and I would want to connect and unload, and talk about the day. I’m a talkative guy anyway, so it’s not like I need to just put myself in front of a TV or read a book. I enjoy conversation. After kids it’s a little different. I come home and I still have to work.

One of the most profound things that I heard about this was from Matt Chandler about men, almost as a rally cry to “You’re going to work all day, you’re going to come home, and you’re going to work, and when you go to bed at night, you’re going to put your head on your pillow and you’re going to be exhausted.”

You didn’t have time for video games, you didn’t have time. It’s not that you can’t have fun with your family. Of course you can. But is it fun with your family, or is it fun with—your point—that person on the other side of the world who you don’t even know?

Shaunti: Yes. You know what? This is the important thing for us to try to help these wives who are asking this question, “How do I navigate this? Because Ryan just passed along what Matt Chandler said. How do I pass that along to my husband?”

Brian: Right. How do you have that conversation?

Shaunti: Because this—and I will say what I have heard from many woman. They come up to me at the book table, and they aren’t sad. They’re not grieving. They are mad! And they’re like *I feel like I’m married to a man-boy*. And they’ll say that. “I feel like I’m married to an immature, juvenile guy who cares more about himself than about me.”

So the question is—I have a couple thoughts on this, but really, here we are with you two gentlemen, and especially Ryan. How would you, Ryan, suggest to a wife to navigate that?

Brian: Yes. Now you’re really on the witness stand.

Ryan: Now I'm really here, yes. Well, probably the best advice I would have—I would just kind of walk through how Bethany and I tried to tackle this. As a guy, hearing those accusations really comes from a place of misunderstanding.

Brian: On whose part?

Ryan: To me, as a guy, the perspective at first is going to be, "Well, she doesn't understand. She doesn't know why I do this. She doesn't like the video games. She's never played. How can she know?"

Shaunti: She just doesn't get this.

Ryan: She doesn't get it.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Yes.

Ryan: She doesn't get it. To me, I think empathy is such a huge key in a relationship, even if you're dealing with a really intense conflict that's hard to overcome.

If you can even recognize the need to have empathy for the other person and say *Okay, before I start name-calling, before I start saying this is stupid, let me try to understand why you're doing this every day. Let me try to understand why you're coming home, playing for three hours straight, missing bedtime. Why?*

So that was kind of the first place for me, *let me show you. Walk into my world for a little bit. Here's what I do. Here's who I'm playing with. Here's who I'm talking to. It's not some dude in Siam; it's your brother, it's a guy from men's group.*

We were talking to a friend of mine recently, we're just chatting online, and he's telling me "I have to have heart surgery in a couple of weeks. Can you pray with me?"

Shaunti: So the first step, what I'm hearing, is that the first step for us as women is to even no matter how mad we are, and legitimately so often, no matter how much we feel ignored, is to recognize *Okay, this guy loves me. He wouldn't be ignoring me for something stupid, that we would think of as a stupid thing. There has to be more to it than that. There's something that's engaging him in some way.*

So I may think it's gone off the deep end some way, but still, to be able to honor that as much as you can and empathize, like "I know that this is super fun for you, and I'm glad that you get a chance to hang out with your buddies online," because that's what they're

doing, right? This is fellowship. “I’m really glad you get that, but—“ So then, what’s step two?

Ryan: So the “but” is—

Brian: Can I just jump in here real quick? Because it’s not just-- Insert anything besides video games, because that’s not me, and it would be easy for guys to either look down or kind of have this condescending attitude about it. You could put anything. It used to be the garage. The husband would come home—

Shaunti: The workbench.

Brian: --and he would go to the garage and fix the car, and that was where his escape was. Or it could be the TV, or it could be a hobby. It could be fill-in-the-blank, I want to do something to escape; I want to do something to get away. So how am I navigating that conversation? I want to be careful. It’s not just video games. It’s a bigger issue of guys want to escape.

Shaunti: Yes.

Ryan: Yes. So the second part is to your point, Brian, the escape. Is my husband doing this to escape? Is he doing it to connect with his friends? Is it a combination of both? Probably, but when it becomes an escape there is something else going on mentally in his head. There is something he’s escaping from, and the question that my wife would always ask was, “Why doesn’t he want to come run to me?”

Brian: Right.

Ryan: “Why would he not want to talk to me?”

Shaunti: That’s what every woman listening to this is thinking.

Brian: Yes, exactly.

Ryan: “Can he not talk about this with me?” or “Is there something going on so bad that he can’t talk about it at all that I should be worried about?” So that’s where our conversation ended up leading was, “What is it that you’re trying to work out whenever you are playing these games?”

“Tell me about what’s going on at work or in that friendship or whatever it could be that you’re needing to escape from, and why is it the video games that you want to run to?”

I remember, too, and this was just with our small group. We were talking about video games as being exactly that, that escape, and just having the honesty with other men to look at that and say *In the midst of this, are we choosing to run to something other than Jesus?*

Even if we were going to go and talk to our wives, our wives can't be an ultimate escape either. We have to have a relationship with Christ where we can truly pour things out to Him. My wife can listen to all these things and think, *Okay, I don't know what to say to him. At least the video games give him some kind of entertainment. He's going to tell me all of this and then I'm going to say "Oh, and can you take out the diaper pail?"*

(Laughter)

Shaunti: It's true!

Ryan: So there's got to be the end of the road.

Brian: Yes. That's great; that's nice, but we have a child to take care of. We have dishes to do, or we have X to do.

Shaunti: What is the way—now, here's the thing that to me it comes down to, which is what you're getting to—is how, because for me as a woman, I need to really keep in mind *how can I have these kinds of conversations with my husband about what I need from him without making him feel criticized and accused?*

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: And it starts, to me—and you guys have to tell me whether you think that this is accurate—it starts to me by appreciating what he's already done, and by telling him how much I appreciate and value all these things that he does, but to be able to say pretty directly in some way that "Yes, listen, we don't get to not work. We have children now, right?"

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: "You come home, you don't- I don't get three hours off because I've been working all day. This is something I need you to step up." So I have some ideas about how a woman can say that.

Brian: Yes, I'm looking forward to these.

Shaunti: No, no. I want you guys to chime in here, because this is an example of where I want to set aside some of the things that I've heard and see if I hear them from you gentlemen. How can a wife say that?

Brian: And now I feel like I'm on the witness stand here, because I do think—I wrote down the word “posture.” For me so much of it is the posture of Jenn. I don't know how Bethany entered into that conversation, because when it comes at it from the point of view “These are stupid, this is idiotic, I can't believe you're doing this,” it makes me as a man want to do it more.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: It makes me want to escape more because you're not loving what I love. I like how Ryan said it from the beginning. “Step into my world a little bit,” which is exactly what a wife wants. “I want you to step into my world--”

Shaunti: Exactly.

Brian: “And understand where I'm at, so I'm asking you to do the same thing.” And if the posture is “Listen, I understand, I want to understand why you love it.” And then “I want to help you figure out where can we do this to where it feels like a win-win.” Like if my wife is coming to me and going—

Shaunti: I like that.

Brian: “Honey, I want that for you, but I also want us to feel like we're one.” I like what Peter says in his letter. He says, “To sum it all up, be harmonious.” How do I create harmony, to where if I come in with my posture of creating disharmony from the beginning, like I'm antagonistic toward you about this, then I've already lost harmony.

But if I come at it with *I'm going to be harmonious, how do we come to wins on this*, to where I'm stepping into your world, you're stepping into mine. I'm more apt to now go, “Okay, how can I help?” Because ultimately I want the place. I want the place of escape.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: And if you give me a chance to work it out to where it's like at the end of it I want to give you that, that's helpful for me.

Shaunti: And the thing that you're saying, Brian, that I think so many women have a hard time believing, is sometimes we think *No, he just doesn't care. He doesn't really care about me enough that he recognizes that this is a joint marriage.* And I think that's us really choosing to believe the worst, and we do have to choose to believe the best.

There are going to be outliers. There just will be, right?

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: Like my friend's husband. We tried to work them through this marriage issue so they wouldn't end up divorced, and in the end it unfortunately went that direction. But, in most cases—I think that that was particularly an unusual level of addiction. That was not normal. In most cases, a guy cares about his wife.

Brian: Sure.

Shaunti: I love that, presenting it as “I want you to have this, because I know how much you enjoy it. But how can we do it in a way that's a win-win?” I love that.

Brian: Yes. Ryan, where did the conversation end up? Now, if Elliott's 2½, where are you guys now?

Ryan: Now, it is pretty healthy. Certainly, if things are stressful at work things tend to increase.

Shaunti: Never! It never gets stressful here, does it Brian?

Brian: No. Not at FamilyLife!

Shaunti: Never.

Ryan: No, no way. When life stresses are thrown at you, we're always going to run to something that's comfortable. We're going to run to something that we know works, so there's a balance now. I can remember times where sure, I'm sitting there playing a video game, but she's next to me, and as I'm playing I'm talking about my day.

Brian: Hmm!

Ryan: So there's—

Shaunti: Oh, that's interesting.

Brian: Would that work, Shaunti?

Shaunti: That actually would work in some ways. It still has, as a wife, I'll just tell you—

Ryan: Or we're playing together.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: I was going to say, is she playing?

Shaunti: Yes, playing together. Or playing together if she's into that, but I'm not a gamer either, okay? So there would be a twinge—and I know that there's many wives listening right now who are like *Shaunti, please represent well here*, because what many women are thinking is *But I want his attention*.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: *I don't want his attention on the game. I want his attention on me, otherwise it doesn't count, because I don't think that it's real attention.*

And yes, that is probably true, but it doesn't mean that all of that has to be all attention all the time. You can have some compromises where sometimes you are sitting next to him on the couch while he games and talks. And sometimes it is right to want his full attention.

Ryan: It depends on the conversation, really.

Shaunti: Yes. Give us an example if you think—

Ryan: If we're talking about schedules and we're talking about "Hey, I've got this coming up and I need you to see it on my phone or on this piece of paper. Look at it." Obviously I can't be playing video games while we're doing that.

Brian: Right. Wait till I kill this guy. Hold on.

(Laughter)

Ryan: Yes.

Shaunti: Yes, exactly.

Ryan: I think for Bethany it started out with *I'm at least hearing how he's feeling, and if it takes interaction or doing something mindless with a video game, he's in a comfortable space where he can talk now*. That was the first part of it, really. So I could be sitting there playing a mindless game and she's like "Okay, so what's going on?" and I can just start talking.

Shaunti: It's almost like a lot of women, one of the things that we don't realize about men is that face-to-face conversation can actually be uncomfortable, and a lot of women

don't realize, because for us sitting down over coffee with a girlfriend is like the most intimate thing, as a friendship generator. Yet men, when you're looking them straight in the eyes, it generates actually a fight or flight reaction in the male brain.

Ryan: Totally. Totally.

Shaunti: So sitting next to each other on the couch while he's actually doing something else, as long as—

Brian: While he's actually fighting.

Shaunti: There you go. He's fighting somebody else, not you.

Brian: He's fighting, or he's playing. Right.

Shaunti: It actually isn't the worst thing in the world as one small step into transition into a deeper conversation. It can't be a real conversation that's going to feel fulfilling to her in that way, but it can at least get you started.

Ryan: Absolutely, and once the conversation is started, I think it's that much easier to put the controller down.

Shaunti: Really?

Ryan: Yes.

Shaunti: Oh, that's interesting.

Ryan: You're in the midst of it, and then you start feeling like *Okay, I need to really convey what happened or how I felt about how he responded to this, so I'm going to pause it and I'm going to go in and explain it now.* For me especially this is true.

Shaunti: That is fascinating.

Ryan: I don't multitask or multi-think very well at all.

Brian: Nobody does, really.

Ryan: No one really does, right.

Shaunti: Women do.

Brian: Oh, that's right. None of us guys do.

Ryan: Yes.

Brian: You women can. You have that gift.

Shaunti: But you can't, so--.

Ryan: Of course not. So for me, I recognize that as a weakness that a lot of people have, so even if I'm driving down the road and I'm having a conversation with Bethany at the same time, I'm going to miss my exit.

Shaunti: Mmm. I got you.

Ryan: If we're trying to have a conversation and I'm playing video games at the same time, something's going to suffer. I'm either going to not perform as well in the video game, or I'm not going to respond to the question that she's actually asking or I'm going to mis-hear it or something.

So there's a signal there to the wife of, *okay, if this is how it starts, if I'm talking to him while he's playing, is he going to put the controller down or is going to say "Can we just talk later?"*

That's where I think the moment of truth comes for a relationship, is what is he going to choose here? Because for a wife, it sort of always feels like he's choosing video games. He's choosing it again, and again. He's choosing it for three hours straight.

But if you enter into his world and you say, "Can we talk while you play?" and then you get into the conversation and he's choosing "I'd prefer to just talk later," or "I can't concentrate with you talking to me right now," or is he putting it down and saying "Okay, for me to really explain this, let me pause it."

Shaunti: It's interesting. One woman that I was interviewing not that long ago, actually, was saying that one way that she and her husband solved this is that, again, believing that he cared about her rather than feeling completely hurt, and said essentially, "Tell me when you'll be rejoining me." Like "I can handle it as long as it's not open ended."

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: "Tell me when you think you're going to wrap up with Brett who you're gaming with tonight." And if he said, "Look, just give me 45 minutes," then she's okay. Then she had to force herself to not get mad because they had made this sort of arrangement. It's almost like he was playing hoops with Brett in the driveway. She would expect him to be talking to her then, right?

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: So having that kind of thing not be open ended is also helpful for a woman. How do you feel about that as a guy?

Ryan: Absolutely. I think setting expectations no matter what it's about is important, for Bethany, especially. She's so expectation-driven. So for me to be able to say "I'm going to play for X amount of time tonight with so-and-so, and then I'll get off," or "I'm going to do the dishes before I get on,"—it kind of helps her know *Are you going to be engaged in our family life tonight, or are you going to be disconnected?*

Shaunti: Then she can relax a little bit. It's really interesting. One of the things I want to share with the women here, is for us to take ourselves out of our female shoes for just a second, because one of the things that I'm hearing from you over and over and over, Ryan, is something I don't think we women really grasp about this, which is our version of fellowship is going and sitting over coffee with a girlfriend and having a long conversation.

We've, many of us, have lamented the fact that our husbands don't have close guy friends, and we want them to have more close guy friends. It's just that we have to set aside what the expectation is what that should look like.

Brian: Right.

Shaunti: They are very unlikely, most of the time, to sit down and have coffee and talk for two hours. But they will game, and they will talk while they're gaming. That to me is okay, if we want that.

It looks different than we thought, but it's giving him fellowship, especially with Christian brothers. That's something that we should do whatever we can to encourage as long as it's in those boundaries where it can be part of our family.

Brian: Yes, absolutely. So what I hear, just kind of summing up, because I want ladies to have hope.

Shaunti: Yes, absolutely.

Brian: If they're in the midst of this and they're thinking *what could I learn from this conversation?*—What I heard you say first is believe the best.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: I think that that's the thing—

Shaunti: Believe that he cares.

Brian: Believe that he cares, and then secondly, step into his world. I heard what Ryan said, just to *let me understand this*, versus just criticizing it.

Shaunti: “This is stupid.”

Brian: Yes, “This is stupid.”

Shaunti: Like “I know this is fun for you, fellowship—“

Brian: Because ultimately you want that.

Shaunti: Yes.

Brian: You want me to step into your world and understand. But then I think *how do I have that conversation?* It has to get to a conversation to start setting expectations. I know one thing that Jenn and I do is just a call on the way home, or at some point in time a text on the way—not in the car, but before you leave to go “What’s your night look like tonight?”

Shaunti: Oh, interesting.

Brian: Or I could even say, “You know, hon, tonight I really need to escape,” or “Today was a hard day. When could I do that?” And for a wife to say the same thing.

Shaunti: Oh, that’s good. Yes.

Brian: Give freedom to each other to go, “Hey, honey, tonight—it’s been a hard day. The kids are a mess. I really need your help.” There has to be that openness of a couple to even have a checkpoint through the day, “What does tonight look like?” Because what happens is, I think where the pain was, is just even in the question that we asked. “Why is it my husband comes home from work and he plays video games for an hour?”

Shaunti: Or more.

Brian: Or more. So how do you set the conversation up so that it becomes something—“How do I honor him, and how does he step into my world?”

Shaunti: I love what you said earlier, and I think women ought to write it down, which is that “Honey, I want you to have this. I know that it’s real; I know that it matters to you. I want you to have fellowship. But how can we do that so it’s a win-win for both of us?”

Brian: Yes. Absolutely. It goes right along with what Paul says in Philippians where he says, “Let each of look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

“Have this mind among yourselves which is also in Christ Jesus.” He didn’t act like—He came down to step into our world. So even if it’s a fantasy world, a video game world, I’m stepping into it because I love my husband.

Ryan, thanks so much for being on.

Ryan: Thanks for having me.

Brian: You did a great job on the witness stand, I thought. It was good.

Ryan: I’m not guilty.

Shaunti: Super-helpful.

Brian: Yes. It sounds like you guys are doing well.

Ryan: We are.

Brian: Okay, good. So as we wrap up questions every wife is asking I’ll be there is one thing that you heard today that you go I’m already doing that really well. Good. Keep it up. But I bet there are one or two other things that you thought I’m not doing that. Well, start there and see what impact it has on your marriage.

Shaunti as always it’s good to be with you. Here at FamilyLife we are passionate about you experiencing oneness in the key relationships of your life. If you need more help and hope we’ve got it at Familylife.com. And, by the way this podcast is listener supported. Thanks to some generous friends they keep us going and you can join that tribe at FamilyLife.com/podcast. Just click the word, “donate.”

I’d love to give a special thanks to our audio producer, CJ3 and our project coordinator Page Johnson for helping to pull this off. We couldn’t do it without their help.

Well, next time on Married With Benefits we are going to ask the question, “Can me or my spouse have friends of the opposite sex?” That’s a touchy one. We’ll tackle it next time. I’m Brian Goins. Seeking to help you love the one you’re with. See you next time.

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