

# Double Date with Mark and Jill

## Handling the Holidays as a Couple

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**Jill Savage:** Merry Christmas! This month's Double Date with Mark and Jill is looking at handling the holidays well as a couple. I don't know about you, but some of our biggest challenges have happened during the holiday season, and we really had to begin to make some changes over the years. Even now, we continue to tweak those and to sort through some decisions that help us to handle the holidays well as a couple.

**Mark Savage:** Yeah. And so, to celebrate and to help you, we have a gift bag that's loaded with six gifts that are really going to help you navigate this holiday season.

**JS:** Exactly. Alright, so let's take a look at what's in our gift bag. The first one is: do a holiday audit. Do a holiday audit, what does that mean? Well, sometimes we do the same traditions year after year, after year, after year. And while our family enjoys them, maybe they don't love *all* of them. Sometimes it's good to do an audit to say, "Alright. If I was only going to make one kind of cookie during the holidays, what cookie would that be?" And see if you can move it from the craziness that maybe you've done in the past down to something a little simpler. Along the same lines, on Christmas Eve these are the things that we do. What means the most to you? What would you be the saddest to lose out on if we didn't do that?

**MS:** Yeah, I think as our kids grew older, they definitely had opinions about what it was that they enjoyed the most and preferred. It was so neat to not just manage that year after year, but to engage them and to hear what it was that meant the most to them for the holidays.

**JS:** We began to make big changes when we began more healthy, clean eating, because one of the things we often did during the holidays was a lot of cookie baking. And I still like to do that! I do it with healthier recipes and I just do less of it; but I didn't want to do away with it completely. I love doing cut-out cookies and decorating them, and so I still want to incorporate that, but I don't have to do it as big or as much as I have in the past. I began to realize when I did a personal audit, what was bringing a lot of stress to my holiday season. And that was something I could change. We could keep the tradition, but we could just simplify it. So, when we do that holiday audit, it's a good time to ask people, "What's most important to you?" and then begin to let things drop off that maybe don't mean as much as other activities or traditions.

**MS:** Yeah, and what's important is that traditions can change, they can evolve. They can become new traditions. And maybe a part of your audit is asking yourself, "What is it that I'm trying to accomplish in my tradition?" I think we've made many changes over the last few years as our kids have grown older and as we've made changes in our personal life.

**JS:** Exactly. So, do a family tradition audit or a Christmas audit so that you can really distill down

to what means the most, and you can preserve those things. That leads into what's next in here. Let it go.

**MS:** I thought you were going to say, "Let it snow".

**JS:** No, no, no. Let it go. So, when we're in the midst of the holiday season, it is so important that we watch the perfectionism. We've got Hallmark movies in our brain, right? And so, we have got to learn how to let some things go. So maybe it's some activities that we need to let go. Maybe it's some expectations that we need to let go. If you want to bake cookies with your kids, you had better expect that there's going to be a mess.

**MS:** Right! [chuckle]

**JS:** A lot of a mess. You better expect that there's going to probably be sprinkles on the floor and icing everywhere. Even on Christmas morning, I think we have this perfect picture in our mind because we've seen the movies and again, the Hallmark movies. Nobody has a bad attitude and nobody gets upset about a gift, and gosh, those are just...

**MS:** It's unrealistic.

**JS:** They're painting a picture that isn't real life. So, we've got to let it go.

**MS:** Yeah, and I think letting it go allows the day, and the season to be enjoyable. You can create memories and a positive sense for your family. That really is the desire of your heart.

**JS:** Exactly, and you know what? Every time the song, "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow" comes on you can change that in your brain to "let it go, let it go, let it go".

**MS:** Yeah, you can.

**JS:** Keep that in mind. It can be a quick reminder that sometimes we have to let things go.

**MS:** Yeah, absolutely! Okay, I'll get the next gift.

**JS:** What is it? Ask for what you need.

**MS:** And so often, many of us don't know how to do that. We don't know how to ask for what we need. I think that goes back to our family of origin, that we were never trained or shown how. To ask for what you need requires the decision to stop expecting your spouse to have the same list in his or her head that you have in yours. Instead, we're having conversation about, "What it is that you need this holiday? What is it that you're planning? What is it that you're thinking of? "

**JS:** Right, or maybe it's a specific event. Maybe it's Christmas Eve. You've probably both got lists, things that you want to get done. It's probably time at that point to merge those lists to the best of your ability to say, "Alright, this is what I've got on my agenda. This is what *I* have on *my* agenda. Let's put them together and figure out a strategy to get all of this done." But boy, our tendency is to ask for what we need with attitudes, not words. So, what we need to do is to make sure that we are asking with kind words, not words of anger, not words of frustration, and that we are also not

expecting our spouse to read our mind or even have the same priorities or the same list in their head that we have in ours. So, we're sharing our lists with each other, and we're sharing the things that need to get done. Oftentimes, I create a physical list on a day, like if we're going to be hosting a big family meal, I will create a physical list of everything that I know needs to be done.

**MS:** Which I love. I so love that because then I know what she's thinking, I know what she needs, I'm engaged, and I'm helping.

**JS:** And so, if we're getting ready to have everybody around the table, these are all the things that we need to have done to be able to sit down at 6:00 or whatever time it is, and that is huge. I do appreciate that you are good about looking at that list. So, recognize that usually one person carries the weight of responsibility for...maybe it's a meal, or Christmas morning or shopping or whatever. If that is the other spouse, that's not you, during the holiday season, please reach out and say to them, "What do you need, how can I help?" That's very helpful. But if your spouse doesn't do that, you still need to ask for what you need, "Hey, honey, I've got three kinds of vegetables that need to be cut up and I'm not going to get it all done. Do you think you could cut up these?" What a difference that makes when you ask for what you need.

**MS:** And maybe for this holiday season, this is the first time you've ever considered it. So, mark your calendar next year to start having this conversation in September or October. But if Jill has 10 things on her list and I have 20, we're not going to get all 30 done. That's irresponsible to our families. And so, in merging that list, it goes back to the previous statement, to let it go. What can we let go of in order to have a holiday that is a fun-filled, life-changing holiday for our families?

**JS:** Alright, let's take a look at the next one. And that is: play to each of your strengths.

**MS:** Boy we had to learn this lesson.

**JS:** Big time.

**MS:** Yeah.

**JS:** I've got to be really honest with you. I love Christmas, but I don't like to shop.

**MS:** No.

**JS:** And I don't like to wrap.

**MS:** No. [laughter] And it starts to create some limitations.

**JS:** Now, that doesn't mean I'm unwilling to shop and that I'm unwilling to wrap, but the truth is, Mark does the majority of the wrapping. He enjoys it. It doesn't bother him. Now sometimes we'll do a wrapping night and we'll work together, but that's one of his strengths and he loves it and it's just not one of the parts that I enjoy. So, he really takes the lead on that and I'm grateful for that. Shopping, we've simplified over the years; we do a lot more online shopping than heading to the mall. And I think many of us are that way, but we do find that we do that together more. We'll sit with our laptop and look at different things and make those decisions together. And I'm grateful for that because it's not my favorite thing to do, whether it's going to the mall or sitting online.

Although I will admit that I like online a lot better than going to the mall. [laughter]

**MS:** She does. Also concerning playing to strengths, because Jill is such a list-maker and an itemized decision-maker, I have really learned that I want to go to her and say, "Okay, what is it that is on your list? What are you thinking of for this holiday?" Or if we're having a family gathering, "What is that going to look like?" Because I want to be a helper not a frustration.

**JS:** And I love when Mark does recognize that my list is a strength and that he is good about helping with those things and jumping in where I need that assistance.

**MS:** Yeah, Jill and I, we have gotten better through the years at playing to each other's strengths, where that wasn't true in the past. It has been the best gift that we have given ourselves in these years to really accept one another and to play to our strengths.

**JS:** Alright, I think we have two more.

**MS:** Yep.

**JS:** Okay, this one! Make your allegiance to your immediate family over your extended family. Whoo, this one...

**MS:** This is a hot button.

**JS:** It is! Big time! Okay, let's define: immediate family would be you, your spouse and any children living at home. Alright? So, you are a new family unit if you are new in this marriage journey. You are your own family unit if you've been in this journey for a while. But it's so important that we are protecting the needs of our immediate family and recognize that extended family expectations come second to what our immediate family decides to do.

**MS:** And we learned this early on. It took us a while, but the stress of extended family was so huge, and we and our kids would end up exhausted during the Christmas season. So, we had to really begin to talk about where our allegiance lies and what's the priority within them.

**JS:** Right. So, it may be that you choose to stay home on Christmas day to be in your own home on Christmas morning. And yes, that's hard if your extended family has all been together up to this point in your life, but it's also okay to start your own traditions. For those of you that are maybe in the season of life that Mark and I are in, our immediate family unit is now just he and I. And so, one of the gifts we're trying to give to our kids is the gift of flexibility when it comes to the holidays. We don't *have* to have Christmas on Christmas day, and if it's just he and I home on Christmas morning because all of our kids are at home with their significant other, their spouse, their kids, then that's okay, because we want to give them the gift of flexibility. But it's got to start with recognizing that your allegiance needs to be to your immediate family, not to your extended family. And you may make grandma mad, you may make your mom angry, but your job is to take care of what is best for your family.

**MS:** And it's possible that you are actually grandparents, and you're in the same season of life that Jill and I are in. Maybe you don't like the idea of waking up on Christmas morning without the family at your house. Well, you're giving that gift of flexibility. That's a huge gift! It'll be so

rewarding to you. And maybe you travel, and you stay at your kids, and you're in one child's house this year and one child's house the next year. But that gift of flexibility is such a huge gift of love and sacrifice.

**JS:** Alright I think we have one more. And that is, keep Jesus at the center of your celebration. Sometimes we just begin to think it's about getting the family together and the presents, and the cookies, and the wrapping and all of that. And we, honestly, begin to miss what the season is really about, and that is, to celebrate when God sent his Son to earth. He sent his son as a child, and Jesus showed us how to live life and ultimately went to the cross for us. This is a celebration of our Savior.

**MS:** Yeah, it sure is. And so, we hope that our gifts will help you handle the holidays as a couple, and that these will make a lasting impact upon you and your family for this holiday.

**JS:** Merry Christmas!