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Season 1, Episode 1: Blended Families, Identity, and Different Last Names

Guest: Dave Bondeson

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I finally was fed up, I'd had it. I just said, "You know what, fine. If you're not going to be part of what we're doing you can just go to bed." I pulled her covers back—almost violently—to let her get into bed and there was a bunch of glass ornaments on her comforter. They shot across the room.

Ron: Oh wow.

Dave: They hit the wall on the other side. They exploded. That's a scary moment--

Ron: Oh yes.

Dave: --for a child. And my intentions were to communicate that we want you with us or it's time to go to bed. What came across was, you know, get in line or you're going to be in trouble.

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.

I know you've had moments as a parent where you thought, "Boy, I just don't know what to say. I'm stuck here. If I say this, I'm going to hurt one child, but it might be helpful to another child." Have you ever felt that? Like you're just stuck, "What do I do?" If you're in a blended family then it's my child versus my stepchild. They each have different ears to hear things, so can I say that? Like is it too soon or should I not go there?

Recently I had a conversation with a friend of mine, Dave Bondeson, he's a stepdad. He's also a pastor a Children's and Family Pastor up at Woodlands Church in Steven's Point, Wisconsin. He and I were talking about parenting dilemmas. He has been there.

Your dad said something to you throughout your life—it was a question, it affected you as a father, what was that?

Dave: Yes, it was less of a question, more of a statement that he just said on a very, very regular basis. As I was leaving the home, he would always look at me or my brothers--I had two brothers growing up--and he consistently said, "Dave, remember you're a Bondeson and you're a Christian." Those are the two things that he would say over and over and over again. In elementary school that was a, "Oh, Dad's talking to me, that's kind of cool."

Ron: Yes.

Dave: Then in junior high and high school it was, "Oh my goodness, Dad, I've heard this a million times. What does it even mean, I'm a Bondeson and a Christian?" But as I think it was when I got into college and I started reflecting on the legacy that my parents left for me, and what it means to be in my context a Bondeson.

What my parents lived out in terms of the character and the humility and the inquisitive nature that they are both scientists that they would bring to life. But then coupling that just with this deep-seated trust in who God is and what God has done, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. You are a Christian. That just became so foundational for who I was. It really became this peace that I fell back on and really relied on.

My dad has since passed away and so he has left a legacy of what it means to be a Bondeson. I still have, to this day--it's been almost ten years ago--, I still have to this day people coming up to me and saying, "This is what your dad meant to me and my life."

Ron: Oh wow.

Dave: "This is what he taught me in a Sunday school class." Or, "This is what he demonstrated as he led a meeting." So to be a Bondeson, to have that family identity has been incredibly profound. That was one of the hardest things I've had to--and I'm continuing to wrestle through--when it comes to parenting in blended family context because I have this familial legacy that means a lot to me and it's been tied to my last name. Suddenly I have someone in my family who love dearly, raising to the best of my ability with my wife, her biological mom and she's not a Bondeson in that last name.

Ron: Right.

Dave: And so it was kind of this tension even growing up of I always figured that I would tell my kids consistently, "You are a Bondeson and a Christian." So that they got annoyed with it and then later they learned the value of it. I've had to wrestle with how blended situations change that, what that looks like.

Ron: Oh my goodness, yes. So I'm thinking about this journey for you and obviously it's very clear that meant something to you, it took on meaning, it gave you a sense of legacy, it gave you a sense of longevity and generational impact and I'm a part of that and I have some responsibility and maybe some obligation.

Dave: Yes. I think the responsibility was huge. It was identity for me really. I'm identified with this couple, my mom and my dad, who have lived out these character traits. I'm identified with the body of Christ and that identity has shaped who I am, how I interact with the world.

As parents I think it's so important for us to help our kids shape their identity in a biblical manner. There are so many, I mean this is such a well-documented reality, there are so many things vying for our kids identity.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: So many confusions about even what can define and what can't define their identity. And as parents who are in the business of world-view shaping business, I think we have to be in the business of identity shaping as well.

I think one of the helpful ways that I saw modeled in my life was just that repetitive phrasing of, "Dave, you're a Bondeson and a Christian." You're a Bondeson, that was a drum beat that was beat into my life and then it was exemplified. It wouldn't have meant the same thing if my parents didn't live it out, but they did. They gave me that bar almost this is what this looks like.

Ron: I want to come back to that identity thing because I think that's really significant. It's a good observation on your part that it's different in blended families but we still have to get there somehow. So tell us a little bit about your family, set the stage for us.

Dave: Yes. So I've been married for eight going on nine years. I have one fourteen-year-old stepdaughter, Leyla, she's beautiful. She's unbelievable. I like to make other parents jealous by telling this story, it was a couple of weeks ago now, maybe a couple of months ago where she came up to her mom and I and said, "Hey guys, I just want to let you get out of the house, I have this \$50 gift card for Olive Garden. Go on a date, I'm going to watch the kids."

Ron: Wow.

Dave: "Don't hurry back, just take your time. It's all on me."

Ron: Was this a dream and then you woke up?

Dave: And then we woke up and it was just a dreary day up in central Wisconsin, it was snowing. No, that's the type of gal she is. She's just incredibly gracious, incredibly kind.

It's been a--has not been an easy road for her. So I don't want anyone to think that parenting in our blended context is simple or easy. It's not, there's plenty of bumps, but she is just an incredible young lady. We are excited to see her continue to grow.

Ron: Okay, she's fourteen.

Dave: She's fourteen and then I have three biological children. Eden is seven, Ebenezer is four, and then our youngest Ray is just about three, she'll turn three fairly soon.

Ron: Ebenezer? Boy he's going to curse you when he starts trying to spell his name.

Dave: You know, he goes by "Eben," he's just this sweet. I try to call him "Benny" but his mom won't have anything to do with it. But we could not come up with a name for the life of us. But all of our kids' names have this deep-rooted meaning so we like Ebenezer.

Ron: So there you are again with identity and meaning and labels.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: So even there, you're bringing it in as it relates to all the kids.

Dave: Right.

Ron: So let me just step back a minute into that identity thing that we were talking about. I'm wondering, can you say to the three biological children, "Hey, you're a Bondeson and a Christian"?

Dave: I've really avoided that. So I have started doing that a little bit more with our seven year old as she gets out of the car, sending her to second grade, "Remember Eden, you're a Bondeson and a Christian," because that is her identity. But I think in a blended context we can be alienating in the language that we use, too. So I don't want to say anything that might make Leyla feel like she's not a part of our family.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: So I've tried to be really intentional. I've had intentional conversations with my wife about how we're going to navigate this. If "Bondeson" is going to mean something we have to make sure that it means something for Leyla because she's not--she doesn't have that last name.

Ron: Right.

Dave: Now that doesn't mean that she isn't a Bondeson. So that's a conversation I've had with her as well, "You're going to hear me--you might hear me say this. This is why it means something to me. This is why you are a Bondeson. You are a part of our family. You are included in this."

But I can reiterate that as many times as I want and for a junior higher or high school daughter who you know that's an age where you're going to be wrestling with a lot of identity questions as it is.

Ron: Right.

Dave: I don't need to fuel that fire. And so I've tried to use phrases like, "You're my daughter and a daughter of the King." Things that communicate the same idea: identify yourself with us as your parents, identify you with your heavenly Father, but it doesn't carry the same--maybe it doesn't carry the same pithy punch as "Bondeson and Christian."

Ron: And it doesn't necessarily connect to the generations that preceded in ways that Bondeson does, but I've got to commend you on being really careful about this. One of the core issues that is going on in nearly every blended family is, "Where do I fit? How do I belong?" It is a question of identity and belonging.

You start off with insiders and outsiders, you know people who are biologically related so you're wife and Leyla for example are the insiders on day one when you walked in and you were the outsider. And isn't that interesting that you were a Bondeson outsider now stepping in to try to influence, find a relationship with, and then influence insiders.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: So you know to some degree over time the gap between insiders and outsiders gets smaller in blended families--for most.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: Not every relationship. Sometimes you still have one outlying relationship that hasn't quite merged but with the passage of time--and often it's years--there is this the gap gets smaller. And yet, there's always this sense, it's kind of like with a brother-in-law or a sister-in-law, they're family but everybody knows they're really technically not family.

Dave: Right.

Ron: I mean, at the end of the day you know when the will gets passed out, there's probably a line that gets drawn there just related to blood and so it is what it is. It

doesn't mean we don't love you and include you and you're not very much a part of our world and our life yet but we know that there's a difference there.

Dave: Those are definitely things to navigate and I think that's been one of the biggest adjustments for me in blended family is I was raised in the most traditional family you could draw up on paper. Healthy too, just a remarkably healthy family.

I always assumed that would be my context. So when my family started and it was not my context—I married a single mom, and we walked into life like that, I had to do a lot of adjustments. It's caused me to continue to do a lot of adjustments even now that we have four and it is this blended context.

So I really had to be open handed about the insider/outsider feel and really had to identify and put away a lot of assumptions about what family would always be like. So I think that we've seen the like you said, the insider/outsider mentality shift. But at the same time, I know that my wife and Leyla have a unique relationship that I'm not trying to break into. I'm trying to almost cultivate and encourage.

There are times where it is going to be healthiest for me to say, "There is something going on there that I need to let happen and let them get away for a--"

Ron: Even when you make that decision and that's an amazing grace-filled decision on your part—even then do you feel left out a little bit?

Dave: Yes, absolutely. That's something I really have to wrestle with.

Ron: The outsider thing comes up, there it is.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: Right.

Dave: Yes. There's this almost this tendency I have to put my tail between my legs and walk away and kind of sulk. But I have to stop and I have to say, "Why, why would I ever be disappointed that my daughter and my wife have this unique relationship? Why should I be surprised when they spent the first six years of their life virtually bonded at the hip?"

My wife, we did premarital counseling with my senior pastor and he had this weird, wacky requirement that says that we need to get together with him every year afterwards to do a marriage check-up.

Ron: Okay.

Dave: And he always asks me, “Dave, what made you fall in love with your wife?” And my answer is always the same. One of the primary reasons is I saw how she loved her daughter. I knew the type of mom she was going to be. That’s some insight you get when you’re stepping into a blended family and that maybe you don’t get outside of that. But she sacrificed, she got pregnant at sixteen, she sacrificed everything for that girl. I don’t want to regret that. I don’t want to be disappointed in how she continues to love Leyla, so it has caused me to step back sometimes and feel disappointed, feel hurt, then I have to say, “You know what, this is not something to feel that over. I need to celebrate what God is doing in their relationship.”

Ron: I think that’s a wonderful attitude to have. Because you can’t change it. You know it’s a little interesting to me, a lot of people that I’ve talked to who find themselves in blended-family situations and choose that, and so much about it that they love and then they resent the fact that it’s different. Well, you know, it is what it is.

To embrace it and say, “I’ve got to find my way through, I’ve got to be okay over here as an outsider for a little bit because that is a special and unique relationship that they have.”

By the way, I’m just reflecting back and I’m noticing that you feeling that outsider-ness sensitizes you to Leyla feeling that outsider-ness back to: “I don’t want to say ‘Bondeson’ because she’s not one and then that makes her feel like I don’t fully embrace her perhaps.”

So you know yes there are concerns and fears around this insider/outsider thing. But what I love is that you guys have found a way around that by talking about it, by being open handed, by finding a different language that still works for her. You know that, “You’re my daughter.” You’re still taking ownership and communicating belonging. I think at the end of the day that’s what matters.

The phrase, “You’re a Bondeson and a Christian” worked great for generations because it was 100% true for all people in that situation. It just may have to morph a generation because of the circumstances that you’re in and you’ve found a way to do that.

Dave: I think one of the hardest lessons to learn in blended families is that I’m not going to shoehorn my blended family into a traditional family. I can say as much as I want to say. I can try as much as I want but it is just not going to be the same context. The quicker I have learned to open handedly say, “All right God, then what are You going to do in this context?” the quicker I’ve found peace and I think we’ve been able to move forward.

Ron: We were talking earlier about shaping our kids identity biblically, you know we’ve talked a lot about the, “You’re a Bondeson” side of that equation. But not so much about the, “...and a Christian.”

Dave: Yes.

Ron: How do we do that? Talk to me about helping to shape our kids and their identity, whether they happen to be biological children or stepchildren.

Dave: I'm a big Deuteronomy 6, guy, "Talk about these things as you walk, and as you lie down, as you walk by the way, as you sit in the gatepost, the door post of the city." This concept of we do disciple making with our kids in the nooks and crannies of everyday life.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: I am a big proponent of ongoing disciple making not making sure that happens during a certain segment or a certain time of day. I'm not a huge family devotion fan. I know some families are incredibly successful in that.

Ron: It works for them.

Dave: And that's incredible. Especially in my blended family context, I've found that it's very, very hard to do. When we started doing family devotions, trying to do family devotions about four years ago, I had a ten year old and I had a three year old. And I had an infant. Trying to have any sort of conversation that even values Scripture in that you know some people say it's not about communicating ideas it's about communicating values and importance. We could not do that. It became a fight every single time.

[Laughter]

Dave: So we've just said that's not the way that we're going to approach this. Instead I want to make sure that whenever anything comes up that could be incidentally related to Christ, to what Christ is doing, to what Christ is about, I want to lean into that and have those conversations in the moments. So that's really become my MO as a parent is that we're eating lunch and my kids mention something and suddenly we're off on a conversation about some level of the Bible or talking about theology.

This happens often, this happens regularly and I've realized that it is because I'm primed for those conversation, I'm ready for those, I'm hungry for them. I'm looking for those opportunities and that's really shaped how I approach those.

Ron: Let me just read Deuteronomy 6, for our listener who may not be familiar with it. It's a passage that basically says, "Look, just talk about things that are important during the natural rhythms of life with your kids." So chapter 6 of Deuteronomy beginning around verse four, verse six he says, "And these commands that I command you today shall be on your heart," so that's first for parents, right? We've got to live it.

Dave: Right.

Ron: We've got to own it. It's got to be in us, then it will ripple out of us for them. "You shall teach them diligently to your children, you shall talk of them when you sit in the house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be on the frontlets between your eyes and you shall write them on the doorposts at your house and on your gates."

So you've got signs, you've got little symbols, things just that you hang onto in natural rhythms of life. As you get up, as you sit down and eat a meal, as you hop in the car and go somewhere, as you're sitting at the soccer game, finding those little moments to just connect faith and life.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: That's what really helps communicate godly values over time and with it a sense of identity that this is who we are. We are people who live and connect our understanding of God and the world with how we live life.

Dave: Yes and if I could say two things particularly about that passage. One is that when Moses is saying this, he is saying "these things" and what he is talking about is ultimately it's the law of Israel, it's the law that's been handed down on Mount Sinai that's going to be proclaimed on a regular basis.

It's not the things that the parents are finding and trusting in Scripture during that day. It's really the institutionalized religion. So I think for me this highlights the value of parents making church a priority in their lives and being in church regularly. And then saying, "What worldview-shaping elements am I receiving from the church that I am putting myself under? How am I going to communicate those things to my kids?"

So it's not this open-handed you know whatever you feel like talking about on a regular basis start sharing those with your kids. That can get dangerous in a sense and as a pastor I get a little defensive about some of those things.

But the other thing is what you did mention, too, is it starts with us. It starts with us being filled with the knowledge of what God is doing and the work that God is doing and the beauty of the Gospel and it overflows into our kids.

So often we talk about parental intentionality as when we get to a moment where we have to choose how to respond, we make a decision to respond in a way that's biblically focused. I've thought about intentionality more in that I'm so filled with the things of God, I'm so passionate about the things of God that when I respond, the natural way that I respond, what is naturally going to come out of me is biblically oriented and biblically directed.

The intentionality starts almost even before the response. It starts with what I'm going to fill myself with not this decision that happens in the moment of response. If that distinction kind of makes sense.

Ron: I think it makes sense. What I'm hearing as I'm thinking about my own life, my own walk when I started having children and what I realized is that I'm not very gentle in my discipline. I'm really pretty harsh in my discipline that's my natural--so I'm thinking, "All right, I've got to put on the fruit of the Spirit of gentleness." And that's got to be in me so that when the moment comes that is who I am when I respond.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: And I can't just manufacture gentleness in a moment, I mean, maybe you can you know but most of the time you won't. So it really has to be my ongoing discipleship journey that inserts that into my heart and soul and mind so that when something happens with my children, that leads. Is that what you're saying?

Dave: Yes. One hundred percent. It's inflow and outflow. We can be intentional as parents about our inflow but our kids are going to be defined by our outflow, especially by our knee jerk responses.

Ron: So let me run this back through the filter of identity for a minute because is that easier for you to do with your three biological children than with your stepdaughter? I mean is there any thought that runs through your mind of, "Hey even though this outflow, this response, is biblically oriented and centered it's value centered I know my relationship with Leyla is different than my relationship with the other three." Does that affect how it comes out of you?

Dave: I think that I am more guarded in my responses with Leyla.

Ron: A little more cautious?

Dave: Definitely a little bit more cautious. And it's partially--you've talked a lot about relational versus positional authority. What authority do you have? I know that my authority especially over the first many years of our relationship was positional and I knew that I could lose that more quickly if I respond in a manner that is interpreted poorly.

Ron: Just for our listener real quick, positional authority is you're the man of the house right so there's a position, right.

Dave: I'm stepdad.

Ron: Like a teacher in a kid's class room they have a position that affords them a certain amount of authority and children basically respect that. But that doesn't mean

they love the teacher. It doesn't mean Leyla loves you. So early on you were kind of responding out of positional authority and did that evolve and change?

Dave: It has. It has. But one of the things I've had to be guarded about I think is that it's not my intentions that will determine how she interprets my actions. So I can have the best intentions but if her interpretation of my actions is negative or really, really you know, "He was so mean in that context." Then that's going to affect our relationship.

It doesn't mean that she gets to steer the ship. That doesn't mean like her perception of everything is definitional but I have wanted to be very intentional about making sure that I'm guarding myself to not respond in a way that can be very, very, very negatively interpreted. Can I give you an example of a time that really went poorly for me?

Ron: Yes, please.

Dave: This is kind of the low part maybe of my stepparenting: we were decorating the Christmas tree and she had begged and begged and begged and finally got her own Christmas tree in her room. So she's decorating that tree. She was probably nine, not in a good mood, not in a good time, whining a lot, yelling, angry. I finally was fed up, I'd had it. I'm not a guy who responds really, really strongly, I try to reserve that for moments when I want to make a pretty powerful impact. This has worked out sometimes.

Ron: [Laughs]

Dave: But I just said, "You know what, fine, if you're not going to be part of what we're doing you can just go to bed." I pulled her covers back—almost violently—to let her get into bed. My intention was to make a bold statement that just said, "You're either part of what we're doing right now or you can, you know, be in your room by yourself."

There was a bunch of glass ornaments on her comforter that when I pulled it back they shot across the room and hit the wall on the other side. They exploded. She took a look at those, burst into tears, that's a scary moment for a child. It came across--my intentions were to communicate that we want you with us or it's time to go to bed. What came across was, you know, get in line or you're going to be in trouble. It did not go over well.

Honestly, Ron, I spend months recovering as a stepdad from that. That hurt our relationship in such a way—in part because it was a side of me that she hadn't seen, but in part just because what I communicated through that it did not go over well.

Ron: Yes, it spoke to her safety with you.

Dave: Very much.

Ron: And it damaged it, it sounds like.

I like to say it this way: how did you breathe through those months of trying to repair when you knew, “Gosh I have really kind of made this difficult.”?

Dave: Two things: One, I intentionally addressed it as often as I could. I certainly made sure that I apologized. I didn’t apologize in the height of her emotional response. That wouldn’t have communicated to her at all. I let her know that I was sorry but that wasn’t where I sat down and explained to her that I made a mistake, I responded the wrong way.

I made sure that she understood that but then outside of that I went forward with the knowledge that I had damaged our relationship. That I needed to be careful in the conversations that we had. That I needed to realize that that instance was going to be a lens through which she viewed our interactions. So the things I said, the ways that I responded would be viewed through that lens for a time. And that gave me an added level of empathy and an added level of caution in approaching that.

Ron: I appreciate that. At the end of the day, apology, confession and forgiveness is what’s needed in that situation and you have to take the lead in humbling yourself and apologizing and talking around it and making it overt and then pressing forward gently hoping and praying that she eventually softens and things can be restored.

Dave: One of the things I realized in that too is I am not a stepparent in a cultural vacuum but there’s a cultural preconception of what stepparents are.

Ron: Oh really? You mean the wicked stepmother?

Dave: You know what? It happens.

Ron: The abusive stepfather?

Dave: A little bit here and there. And that really affected my ten-year-old daughter and even though I had never shown any signs of any of that.

Ron: How did you know that it affected her?

Dave: She had said things here or there that I thought she was primed to believe that and suddenly I fell into a stereotype. One action that was outside of the norm, it wasn’t a mistake it was a “revealing my true colors as the evil stepparent” so it was helpful to realize that and navigate that a little bit.

Ron: It’s so unfair but it’s true. I mean I hate to say it but it can only take one instance and a child can kind of put you into that category.

One of the things I say in the book *The Smart StepDad* is you've got to round off your rough edges for this very reason. If you just have a quick temper or you talk loud or you're a little obnoxious, people have told you but you kind of never really paid attention. You've got to watch that stuff because it can throw you into a category you don't want to be in.

And you know something else relates to this and I'm thinking of the biological father—Leyla's father. One of the things that we know about kids who have both a biological dad and a stepdad is that when the bio dad and the stepdad get along well and the child has a good relationship with both of those men, that they have better outcomes in their lives than if they just have a good relationship with their biological dad.

It's really important that there is an authentic connection with both men and those two guys kind of basically respect each other and are not openly hostile toward one another. The more they get along the even better that is for the child.

It occurred to me as I was thinking about that. That too is an identity issue. I mean, you can't call her a Bondeson because she's not, a different last name, but then when she goes to her Dad's house on occasion everybody's reminded of who she belongs to in that sense, right? So all this stuff is tied together.

Okay Dave, so we're talking about leadership and identity and your role as a stepfather and you're also a biological dad and there's some distinctives there like it's super easy with your kids. They know exactly who you are and you know exactly who you are with them. Then there's a little bit of a question mark with Leyla, it's a good relationship definitely gotten better over time but yet it's not as clearly defined as the others.

You're an intentional dad, you teach people about parenting you're committed to that topic and here you are trying to live it out in your own life. So there's this interesting dilemma between the limits of your role as a stepfather and who you want to be as a leader in the home for the kids. What's good healthy parenting look like and how is that maybe different or the same as it relates to your role as a stepfather?

Dave: Yes, I appreciated that you said I “teach about parenting” and you certainly stayed away from any term like “parenting expert” or anything like that because I think the only thing somebody who studies parenting knows is that they don't know anything about parenting.

Ron: [Laughs] That's right. Somebody who is a parenting expert is selling something.

Dave: Oh my goodness, yes. The more time you spend—every context is so different.

Ron: It is.

Dave: I think that is probably just one of the important things that everybody needs to hear is that contexts are different. Situations are different. It's not going to look the same.

Ron: Right.

Dave: I started using a phrase just a couple of weeks ago that I think has been really, really helpful, it's: the things you don't do as a parent are really poor indicator of the good things that you do, do.

Ron: Say that again.

Dave: Yes, let me say it a little bit more clearly. The good that you aren't doing as a parent is a poor indicator of the good that you are doing. And it's that as parents we spend so much time looking at what we're not doing.

Ron: Oh yes.

Dave: You hear your friends are doing family devotions or you hear someone's going on a family vacation but they're actually doing a missions trip instead of a vacation. And these other friends are packing 15 shoeboxes different things like that and suddenly you feel like you're failing as a parent.

We tend to judge our effectiveness or our goodness or our worth based off of what we're not doing instead of actually looking and taking good inventory of, "Okay where am I succeeding? Where am I being intentional? Where am I being faithful in the calling that God has given me at this time, at this place in my parenting journey? How can I be more gracious in my approach to parenting?"

Ron: Yes. Wow. You call people to Romans 5, as a source of what good parenting is.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: Talk to us about that.

Dave: Yes, so Romans 5:8, is one of my favorite passages in Scripture. I think it's one of the most important stepfamily/blended family verses. In the NIV it's: "God demonstrates His love for us in this that while we were sinners, Christ died for us." And the way that I really unpack it is I don't love the translation "demonstrates" in that verse, "God demonstrates His love." The word is actually more "proves."

Even the original language, the Greek word would be used for metals refined. So it tests the purity of God, God reveals the purity of His love for us in this that while we were sinners Christ died for us. That while we rejected His authority, while we walked away

from Him, while we did everything we could to distance ourselves from identity with God He sacrificially gave Himself up for us.

Ron: That is such an amazing thought when you absorb it.

Dave: It's the Gospel.

Ron: It is.

Dave: It's what we should live in but it's also so prescriptive for parenting. It's, "How are my kids going to know that I love them? How is Leyla my stepdaughter going to know that I love her?" It's while she is doing everything in her power to hold me at arm's length, I'm going to do everything in my power to sacrificially love her.

It doesn't mean that there aren't going to be consequences for discipline. It doesn't mean that our relationship isn't going to have its ups and downs and all of those things. But there are so many instances and opportunities that we have to demonstrate this truth and to prove our love.

I look out in the world and I see people at all stages and walks of life still walking in rebellion from God. I know that no matter how much of their life they have lived, Christ has still sacrificially giving for them. So I know that one of the paradigms for my family my parenting journey is that I will never stop sacrificially pursuing my children.

Now what that looks like might change based off of decisions they make. Going forward I don't know I don't have any guarantee that my kids are going to continually walk with the Lord, but I do know that God has given me this charge and it's to sacrificially love my kids and prove my love for them. I'm going to lean into that in every instance I can.

Ron: I think that's such a powerful word and there's just times when that's easier to do than others. There are times I can tell you as a dad with two grown boys there are times when I'm thinking, "I don't get you. How did you get here? Where's that coming from? and boy, I wish you would make a different choice."

In those moments you know it's that, "How do I love? How do I communicate that your performance doesn't dictate whether or not I'm here for you?" And at the same time bring some wisdom or encouragement or a little nudge in a different direction. That I think is the powerful combination, but it all starts with love.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: If we don't lead there, then the other stuff gets misunderstood and pushes them sometimes in the wrong way.

Dave: And there's nothing that's more important as a parent to communicate than love. I think sometimes we're afraid, "Am I going to communicate that I approve of this behavior that I knew was wrong." or, "Am I going to communicate that this is the direction that you should go when I know you shouldn't?" But we can't allow that fear to dictate our response. We need to allow love to dictate those responses. Then of course in this there is so, we need so much wisdom.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: In terms of how to make those decisions so even as you were sharing about some of the tensions maybe with some of the decisions your sons have made. We all have tensions in those contexts. The need for community for parenting community for people that we can just bounce ideas off of, say, "Hey this is what's going on in my kids' lives. You've walked with me for years or decades of this parenting and this is how I think I should respond, what do you think?" We're not going to necessarily have that wisdom in and of ourselves, but we have to have that community.

Ron: Let's turn the corner and talk a little bit about the local church.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: Again, back to your day job. You're a professional pastor.

Dave: Nine to five.

Ron: Children and family pastor and so you've got that lens and at the same time you've got the stepdad lens. I'm wondering how the stepdad experience has informed your role as a ministry leader and what kinds of practical things would you share with church leaders about making a difference in the lives of kids and students in churches?

Dave: Wow. Well I started in ministry in a small town in northern Wisconsin, where there were not many traditional nuclear families. I grew up and was raised in a very traditional nuclear family. I almost think Ron that if I had had that in ministry, got married and then had biological children, I would have missed so many opportunities to minister to people where they were hurting the most.

I would have lost a little bit of a voice because I was a stepdad because I stepped into that role that gave me a platform and a voice to speak into some lives where they were hurting the most. Because there is this sense that if you're not a stepparent, oh I don't know what a stepparent, you don't know what you're talking about. And it's not necessarily true but I think there is a guardedness about it.

So it definitely opened my eyes to being cautious moving forward. One of the biggest things that I've realized in ministry and this is just as a pastor I communicate a ton with parents and the language that I use to communicate with parentings in emails and

online anything I can either be intentionally inclusive to stepfamilies in that language or I can ostracize them.

Ron: Right.

Dave: So if I send out an email to hundreds of parents saying, “Hey Moms and Dads, this is what’s coming up.” Right off the bat, I’ve lost parents.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: I’ve not paid attention to stepfamilies. For a nuclear parent they would never once think about that, they wouldn’t even blink their eye. But for a stepparent that might completely change how they perceived my ministry.

Ron: The opposite is also true, they will immediately notice the language that’s inclusive. And they will go, “He knows that we’re here. He is aware of my situation on some level, and he is inviting me in.”

Dave: Yes.

Ron: To me I call that a bridge of grace, you’re saying “Look, we’re glad you’re a part of this church. You don’t have to hide your past your story if you have any sort of shame around that. It’s all good. We’re glad that you’re here.” That little, little thing really communicates a very important message.

Dave: That’s the other thing that I think is so important in ministry. There is shame around a lot of the formation of blended families, whether it’s divorce, whether it’s extramarital pregnancies, whatever was the foundation of the blended family, I think there’s a tendency that pastors have and ministry leaders have to shy away from those situations, to almost close their eyes and to say, “I’m going to pretend like this isn’t a blended family situation. I’m going to pretend like there wasn’t something messy at the beginning of this and I’m just going to treat these kids like just normal biological kids.” But when you do that it’s ostracizing.

Ron: Right.

Dave: It’s saying, “Your story doesn’t matter,” or even worse, “You shouldn’t talk about your story here in the church because it’s too messy.”

Ron: That’s right.

Dave: So I think pastors need to lean into those situations and there’s almost a razor’s edge that you have to walk of we can’t be afraid to say, “Yeah that was wrong. Wow. That was so hard. That is messy.” But at the same time we need to be broken hearted about the hurt and the pain and the history in these stories.

So I think for so many pastors just asking questions, sitting down with stepcouples and starting with, "Tell me your story, let me where you came from. Let me know what makes your family tick. Let me hear your story. And pray with you."

Ron: And you're saying when something comes out in that story that is not necessarily God's prescription for relationships or family we don't have to panic we don't have to somehow run away from that part of the story. Running away from it sends a shame message.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: That people pick up. You're saying just go ahead and kind of talk through that and acknowledge it not in a judgmental sort of a way but it is part of their story.

Dave: Right, and we can be broken hearted about the hurt and the pain that has led people to where they are. It's not wrong but at the same time we can be filled with grace and love and acceptance for where they are in the hard road that they're walking in right now.

Ron: Earlier I so appreciated you telling the story about your now wife who got pregnant when she was a teenager and that's part of the story, right? That's how you end up coming into the picture. And I appreciate you sharing that. In a lot of contexts people will not share that because instantly they feel ashamed, they feel judged, they feel a response whether it's a nonverbal reaction from somebody.

And then they feel marginalized from the church and we inadvertently push them away from the very thing that could offer them hope and community and encouragement for the future, the redemptive nature of what church is all about. So, I think it's so important that we do that as pastoral leaders *or* we shoot ourselves in the foot.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: In terms of being able to reach them or their kids. How about children in particular? Are there any structural changes you've made in your ministry? Anything you tell your teachers about you know complex families to just help sensitize them to the kids they are dealing with or students?

Dave: Yes, we've done a couple of trainings with our volunteers just in terms of working with kids from hard places and what that looks like and just making sure that Sunday school teachers or small group leaders in our ministry are aware that not every child comes from a context that they might be familiar with and that those contexts, those messy contexts, those hard contexts will affect how they sit in class, how they perceive what the teacher is saying, how they even listen to the teachers and authorities.

Blended families/stepfamilies aren't as prevalent in the ministry culture that I am in right now necessarily, so we haven't been as intentional about those programmatic plans as we have in other context than I have at other contexts. I think that I have definitely approached it more relationally in terms of a ministry context.

So less talking to teachers about how to respond to those kids in those situations and more defining small groups of other stepdads to talk with and talk through those situations and say, "Share your experiences."

Ron: You were talking earlier about community and parenting and sharing and letting other people give feedback and just helping each other out. Is that part of what you're saying there?

Dave: Yes, I think that it's so important. I like to think about parents in two different categories. Either an "are there" parent—you are in a parenting context or a "been there" parent—you have been in a situation.

I divide those by seven years. That's kind of arbitrary and probably influenced a little bit by your book, *The Smart Stepdad* and talking about that authority transition. But if you've been in a parenting situation for seven years I think that you have some authority or some insight to talk to parents that are in that situation.

I think it's just so important in our church contexts to get "are there" and "been there" step parents together. This is weird language but "are there" parents might be "been there" parents, too. I've "been there" as a parent in the step parent with an early elementary daughter. I've been there, that was seven years ago for me. I "am there" with a teenage stepdaughter.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: So I can be talking to stepdads who are just entering into that journey and sharing my experiences. Not because they're prescriptive, not because my experiences are going to be their experiences, but because they're descriptive, because I have experienced some of these tensions. I can even I can normalize some of those things for them. I can say, "Yeah that's totally normal. That might get better. [Laughs] It might not."

Ron: "But at least I'm with you brother."

Dave: At least I have some hope you know it offer and, "Yes, you're going to make it. You're going to make it through this." But then I also have to be finding parents who are further in the journey for me, which I think is harder because blended families while they're certainly not a new thing at all, I've experienced there are less experienced blended family, there are less people who have been 15-20 years out of the stepparenting world.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: So I'm hungry to find more of those folks in the church, in all of the churches who can step forward and say you know what I'd love to get together with younger stepfamilies, younger blended parents.

Ron: Take away for our listener that I'm hearing is you can be mentoring somebody. Somebody who you're a little bit further down the road than they are. And you probably need to be in community with somebody who's further down the road than you are.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: That really helps all of us and I absolutely would agree with that. That has been a blessing for my wife and I our entire parenting journey to have people who are further down the road that we call and go, "We're clueless." You know and, "What do we do?" Encouragement is so important but then to be able to come alongside somebody. Not that you're saying you're the expert, as you said, it's not that, but it's just about loving and supporting people.

Dave: And that's where I think the expert language and sometimes even the mentor language scares people off.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: I can't be a parenting mentor. You're not asked to be a parenting mentor. You're asked to be an experienced parent. Have you done this before and can you share what worked in your context? It's a contextualized thing so it might not work in theirs but at least it will give them some sense that, "Oh people have been where I've been and they've made it. They've been okay."

Ron: You've been listening to my conversation with Dave Bondeson. I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended. We'll hear a little more from Dave in just a minute but first I want to talk about this concept of insiders and outsiders.

You know when Dave and I were talking about the Bondeson last name and whether he could invite his stepdaughter into being a part of that, really what's imbedded in that is a question of how does she belong? You know Dave is an insider as a Bondeson but his stepdaughter is an outsider, but then it flipped remember when we were talking about him trying to get into the relationship with his wife and his stepdaughter? So this time Dave is an outsider trying to get in with the insiders, his wife and her daughter.

You see when you're in a blended family you can be in both of those positions at the same time. One minute you're an insider with people a lot like you and have the same

last name and the next minute you're an outsider with people who have different last names. Everybody's trying to belong. Everybody's trying to move from out to in.

If you've ever experienced that in your life, maybe it was in junior high and you wanted to get into the in crowd but you know what it is to not be in when they look at you funny and you're not sure you belong and you feel like you're less than. Those same kind of feelings can be overwhelming in a blended family situation.

The trick is to not be surprised by those feelings first of all. It doesn't mean you've done anything wrong. It's just inherent to the process, right? Then go to another insider for help. In this case, Dave went to his wife and he could say to her, "Hey look, what can I do? How can I merge in? How can I respect your relationship with your daughter but at the same time what are some ways that I can join that?"

Then try to be patient with the feeling, don't panic. I think one of the big mistakes that people make in blended families is they panic when they're an outsider. They feel like this is never ever going to change and they give up on the process. Then they start getting angry, and frustrated, and critical of other people who are insiders.

Well guess what, that just makes the insiders want to keep you out. So that doesn't help. So be patient with the process. Find the little ways that you can join and slowly move in.

One last thought, familiness is not found in a last name, it's found in love and trust. Pursue that and outsiders will eventually become insiders.

Now before we hear from Dave, if you've like more information about Dave and his ministry, you'll find it in our show notes, check it out on the FamilyLife Blended page at familylife.com/podcasts.

We'd like to hear from you. Your feedback means a lot to us. Positive online reviews are really appreciated so feel free to do that. Subscribe to our podcast on itunes or stitcher or wherever it is that you get your podcasts. Just search FamilyLife Blended with Ron Deal and remember to look at the show notes for details, links to additional resources and learn about our other podcasts on the FamilyLife podcast network.

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or tablet from anywhere in the world for just 19 bucks. Churches can host the event for \$99.

I'll be there plus a number of guest speakers, including radio personality and pastor Chris Brooks and best-selling author Shaunti Feldhahn. And FamilyLife Today hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson are going to be with us as well. This experience delivered right to you offers practical help and encouragement for blended families from the leading ministry in step-family education, FamilyLife Blended. I hope you'll join us for this one-of-a-kind event, BlendedandBlessed.com
Now, here's a final word from Dave:

Dave: Stepparenting is not a sprint it's a marathon, it's a long-term journey. I have said consistently that I want to parent Leyla in such a way so that when she's out of the home and she's in a stage of life where maybe she has a little bit more self-reflective ability she can look back and she can say, "Dave loved me through the ups, through the downs, through my mistakes, through my decisions, through disagreements, Dave loved me." I don't have any sense that a fourteen year old—again Leyla's unbelievable—but sometimes in that 14, right?

Ron: The teen years.

Dave: Right. You're a teenager so you don't have necessarily the same perception of everything.

Ron: And it's certainly not a mature perception.

Dave: No.

Ron: So what you're saying is, "Yeah, sometimes we don't get along. Sometimes she looks back and says, 'Boy I wish Dave wouldn't have done that,' but I *know* he loved me throughout it."

Dave: Yes. And that's a long-term journey. I want to set her up to be able to realize that now I think she will, I think she realizes that now, and I think that she will continue to realize that throughout her high school years.

But I think more than anything I want to have that view that when she's 25, when she's 30, that she can look back on the legacy that she has been given. Again that comes out of this identity concept is that I look back on the legacy my parents gave me, what they modeled and what they demonstrated in junior high and high school, when I was in junior high and high school and I want to model those same things so that when she's at a more self-reflective age she can see those. So it is leaning into those moments.

And it's also trust. There's a lot of trust that I have not necessarily in her but in God. That God brings these things to fruition. I hold that with an open hand. I know that He

does not give parenting promises, He gives parenting directions in Scripture. “Train up a child in the way that he will go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” That's not a promise.

Ron: That's not a guarantee.

Dave: Nope. It's a direction that we can set our hearts on. So I'm going to do everything that I can to be as faithful in the calling that God has given me. I think that chief center in that calling is to love sacrificially.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: Not just to love, because it's not God said, when we were rejecting Him God said He loved us. That God proved His love *by* sending Jesus to die. So sacrificing for us so I'm going to do everything I can to faithfully live that out every minute that I can that my kids are at home. And then I'm going to trust Him that He will bring that to fruition in their adult lives.

Ron: Now, next time on FamilyLife Blended we'll hear from Dave and Ann Wilson. Dave's going to tell us about as a kid the best Christmas he ever had:

Dave Wilson: Christmas Eve the whole family went to church. I mean it's one of these picturesque moments, I can see snow falling, walking in at the midnight mass type deal, it was probably 10 or 11 o'clock at night. My little brother Craig and I got baptized that night. The whole family's there. We all come back to the house and the entire family room was just presents everywhere, more presents than I've ever seen in my life. Why? I didn't know. The next morning, Christmas Day, woke up, Dad was gone.

Ron: That's Dave and Ann Wilson, 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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