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Season 1, Episode 9: StepParenting with Grace

Guest: Randy and Gayla Grace

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Gayla: So now, not only did I take Jamie through a divorce, now we have gone into this remarriage and she's struggling to reunite with a--or unite to begin with--with a stepdad and step siblings that she didn't have a choice about, coming into a family like this. So then there was some guilt and yes, definitely being pulled on my heart that, "What am I doing to my kids?"

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.

Do you know who needs encouragement? Blended families with adolescents. If you have ever had a teenager in your house or will have someday, you'll appreciate this podcast.

So, how do you give grace to a teenager, to a step teenager at that? How do you give each other grace as parents when it comes to how you deal with that teenager?

My guests are Randy and Gayla Grace. They began their stepfamily journey over 23 years ago, with each bringing two children to their marriage. Then they added one more.

They facilitate stepfamily small groups and speak at retreats and conferences. In fact, they've both been part of our Summit on Stepfamily Ministry.

Gayla founded StepParenting with Grace to offer resources and coaching services to stepfamily couples. She's also the director of the Sisterhood of Stepmoms, a non-profit organization that offers national retreats for stepmoms. She writes for Lifeway, co-authored *Quiet Times for the Stepmom's Soul*, and authored the devotional book, *StepParenting with Grace*.

Randy and Gayla live in Louisiana.

Your ministry is called StepParenting with Grace. Your book is called *StepParenting with Grace*. And your last name is Grace. What in the world is "grace?"

Gayla: Well grace is so important in stepfamily life in my opinion because it's all about offering forgiveness and second chances and redemption, and things that we need in stepfamilies when we don't always get it right. We think that we're doing things right, but in the direction we're going or maybe on a hard day we do things that we need to step back and say, "Okay, I need a do-over." A do-over often times needs grace.

Ron: Do-overs. Those are good things, aren't they?

Gayla: They are good things.

Ron: Yes. And sometimes we do just find ourselves tripping down the wrong road and we need to pull back and take another look at it.

Gayla: That could be with our step kids, but it could also be with our spouse. It could be with an ex-spouse. It could be with our biological children. There's just so many ways that we need to offer grace in stepfamily life.

Ron: If you look at grace from a theological standpoint; first of all 'grace' as a word we just use in the English language sometimes means poise or elegance. Randy, do you always feel like you have poise, elegance in your family?

Randy: We don't have poise and elegance all the time in our family.

Ron: It was a bit of a set-up question, I know.

Randy: But grace--to your question that you'd asked Gayla--grace is what we receive when we're undeserving. We can give that to each other, but obviously that's the grace that we receive from our heavenly Father.

Ron: Yes. Absolutely. That's the more important definition of grace, the theological one where it's where we receive God's unmerited favor on us through Jesus Christ and forgiveness for who we are. I think a lot of people limit grace to just that definition, when really from a biblical standpoint, grace includes ongoing gifts and power and wisdom from God. It's not just forgiveness, but it's well beyond that to help us live life.

That's one of the things you guys try to do in your ministry, is help people live life and live their blended family well. So tell me a little bit about your family.

Gayla: Randy and I married 23 years ago. In our marriage I brought two young girls. My daughters were three and five. Randy had two children, a son and a daughter that were five and ten. Then, six years later we had a child together, Nathan. Nathan is the only child we still have at home. He's a high school senior.

Our kids are now 17 to 33 years of age, so four of them out of the nest. Randy and I are in a new season and about to hit empty nest.

Ron: You can kind of see the vista, it's almost here, empty nest.

Randy: Absolutely.

Ron: Are you looking forward to that, Randy?

Randy: We can. Gayla and I have found out that we have things that we enjoy and in common besides just ministry work that we do. So we know that we're going to be able to enjoy our partnership in life beyond just our parenting roles.

Ron: Yes. So you guys have been at this a long time. You've got yours, mine, and ours. You had two, Gayla, you had two, Randy, and you've had one together.

Randy: Yes.

Gayla: Correct.

Ron: So I'm curious. Looking back, what started well for you guys? Were there any hiccups or pot holes along the way?

Randy: If I could start this--Some people might dismiss some of the effects of birth order, but this was something that we realized because when we got married Adrienne was ten years old. She was queen of the hill, she was the oldest child. So now she just got two more underlings added to the coop.

Peyton, being the only boy, had his role. He was not challenged. Jody, being the baby, at three years old--guess what? She was still the baby. Now she just had more people to look after her. But our dear daughter Jamie, who was the big sister--

Ron: And how old was she at the time when you guys got married?

Randy: Five years old.

Ron: Five years old, okay.

Randy: She and Peyton were both five years old, starting kindergarten.

Ron: Okay.

Randy: Jamie was the one I feel that really went through the most effect because she was stuck in the middle now. There's a big sister, so in a sense her role was taken. That was a challenge, and it took some time to realize that for her, maybe, and recognize that. That was a big challenge, I think, for the dynamics of our family as we got started.

Ron: Yes, that's an interesting observation. "Her role was taken." Unpack that for me, guys, what does that mean?

Gayla: Well, she was a big sister to Jody in my family, in my family of me and my two girls, but when Randy and I married then she became a middle child. So Adrienne was used to being big sister to her brother, Peyton, and naturally assumed that Jamie would respond to her in the same way that Peyton did.

Well Jamie wasn't used to being a younger child or a middle child, and she didn't respond to Adrienne the way she thought she should. Randy and I didn't recognize part of why there was so much conflict between those two girls in particular.

Ron: So it showed itself as conflict between them.

Gayla: Right.

Ron: That's how you begin to see this showing up. At what point did you notice that it was a loss in your daughter, like she had lost her role.

Gayla: I think it probably happened when Randy and I went to counseling, which happened within the first year of our marriage. I remember the counselor saying, "I don't usually see couples quite this early." But with our stepfamily dynamics there were so many things going on, and in part of the counseling I think he was the one who helped us recognize that there was a birth order change that was drastically affecting our kids.

Ron: Okay, so I'm curious if there were other things that led you guys to go to counseling over, but before we jump there, how's your daughter now? It's been a long time, I know, but what's kind of the pathway for her?

Gayla: She's great, and the beauty of it is Jamie and Adrienne have a beautiful relationship. So even though during the beginning years and even adolescence the girls struggled, in their adult years they have really begun to accept each other, the differences in each other, and have embraced each other as sisters.

Ron: I know that warms your heart.

Gayla: It does.

Ron: But in the meantime, before you got to that point, you probably had some sleepless nights over this.

Randy: They weren't always sleepless. Gayla would go to bed with Jamie to put her at ease, to get her to go to rest.

Ron: It was kind of to help her heart out a little bit.

Randy: Absolutely.

Ron: Did you guys see that differently, like how we should respond to her and the other kids and figure that out?

Randy: We did. Actually Jamie was identified as suffering from anxiety. So that was an awareness, and what do we do with that? But that would help us understand some of the behavioral things and her acceptance of the new step/blending family and how could we lead her through that? How could we love her through that?

Gayla: The other thing too, Ron, is that Randy and I parented very differently. That was another thing that created conflict for us in the beginning. We had to learn how to accept each other and the way that we parented. How he parented his children was different than how I parented my girls. Then how he parented my girls was different than how I did.

He was a full-time stepparent from the beginning. So there was a lot of interaction with him and my girls, and we had to work through how to parent each other's children.

Ron: That's something I know our listener can identify with. Lot of couples find that they just have different parenting styles. They watch the same circumstance happen in front of them, and they have two totally different takes on how they should deal with that.

So walk me through that journey for you guys. What was it like in the beginning when you didn't agree, and where did that take you, and how did you find your way through?

Randy: Well my parenting style with Adrienne and Peyton--they were very responsive to me--was I would say and they would do, more or less. With the girls it certainly was not that rigid. Fortunately Gayla and I were able to tailor that, get the resources we needed, and be able to improve on life.

Gayla: The other thing I think we did too, Ron, was we had to learn that we needed to step back from parenting each other's children. I needed to parent my children and Randy needed to parent his, until there was a strong relationship built.

It took a while for us to figure out. There's a lot of resources now that tell you that, but this was 23 years ago. We did not recognize the danger of moving into a parental role without having a trusting relationship in place first.

Ron: Take me into that moment where you're going, "Okay, I've got to step back. I've got to step back. What does that mean? How do I step back?" Was that clear to you, like, "Okay, I know exactly what I should do now." Or was it ambiguous, like, "How do I step back and allow things to happen that I don't necessarily like seeing happen?"

Randy: Well, I want to give a shout-out to First Baptist Church, Salado Texas, for those who know that's there. But that little church had a group of blended families that started studying *New Faces in the Frame*, by Dick Dunn. It was a life saver.

It was certainly better than our professional counseling help because he was not in tune with stepfamilies. He had some good techniques he helped us with, but that resource group was tremendous for us. Then we led that curriculum within our own church in Belton. So it began to build a community with some resources and experiences that we wanted.

I'm one of these people in life, Ron, that winning's not everything, but it's just a whole lot more fun. So I don't like to lose. God had put this fantastic gal in my life. Divorce was difficult for me. I tried to hang on and persevere through those things. I certainly was not going to throw in the towel.

Ron: So you just kept being persistent, trying to figure it out.

Randy: Well, not trying to figure it out haphazardly. It was trying to figure it out intentionally.

Ron: Oh that's a good word. You had to do that together. The study was one way to kind of give you some encouragement, some good information.

Gayla: Also watching other couples and how they did life as blended families was huge for us because all of a sudden you recognize that they have suggestions that would work in our home. Some of them were further along than we were. We were very new in our journey when we joined that class.

So it was just so helpful to interact with other blended family couples and listen to their suggestions. It required some humility on our part, to recognize that we need some help, and we're going to look around at what others are doing that might be doing it better than what we're doing.

Ron: We certainly believe here at FamilyLife that when stepfamily couples get connected with other couples, good things happen. You've just given a testimony to that effect. Even coming together around a little bit of information, sharing, talking, learning from one another, finding encouragement to continue pressing in with intentionality really makes a big difference.

Gayla: Right.

Ron: So we encourage couples listening to this right now and pastors and churches to create those opportunities for couples. It's a big deal.

Gayla: Right, and it doesn't have to be someone who steps in to lead; it doesn't have to feel like they have to have all the answers. It's more of a facilitation. There's some great resources out there. Yours is one, Ron, *The Smart Stepfamily*, that groups can walk through and then have discussion around, specific to their situations. It can just really make a difference.

Ron: Now at the top of this conversation, I said something about whether stepparents felt called to be a stepparent, so at this point in your story, you guys are realizing, "Wow, we parent differently. There's some stuff going on with one of the kids, who has lost their birth order and their place. We see that differently and we're having to figure out how to come together."

Was there a sense of call in your life? I'm just curious, when you got married did you have this sense that God is doing something through me on behalf of my stepchildren? Was that something you consciously were aware of?

Gayla: No, not in the beginning. Not for me. I think it took some time to walk into the role. One of the things that I do believe now is if you are placed in a stepchild's life, God has you there for an important purpose. You have a unique role that's different than the bio parent, it's different than other people in their lives, but sometimes we have to step into it and ask God for wisdom as we walk through it. It might not feel like a specific calling in the beginning. At least I can't say that it did for me.

Ron: Randy?

Randy: When Gayla and I got married I thought I was a step-child pro. I was on my second stepmother.

Ron: Okay.

Randy: And on my second stepfather at the time. Having gone through that, now one of the blessings that I had is that I was always encouraged. I was always loved; that was absolutely a non-issue for me. Now was it dysfunction? Absolutely there was some dysfunction in it, but as a child I was never belittled or that I couldn't do anything. As a matter of fact, I was probably abundant in confidence that I could do things, so that was different.

But because of those experiences, I'm thinking, "Hey, I'm going to roll into this and with Gayla we're just going to love them through." And it's going to be-which is a myth-and get through this because of this so-called, self-proclaimed experience that I had that was just not completely applicable to our new family.

Ron: You know, here's what I love about what you guys are saying, is that no, you didn't have a distinct sense of call in that role, and when you got there, "Man, this is different than I thought it was going to be." And, "I'm not equipped like I thought." And,

“Wow, we have to regroup and figure this out.” And yet, in that process discover a call. I mean I really appreciate that, because I think that’s the heart or an attitude of somebody who’s willing to learn and grow and be taught. That’s what helped you get to a place where things get better.

Gayla: Also, I think you have to realize your stepchild may not have in their other home a place of faith building. It could be a position that you can really invest in your stepchildren in regards to building them spiritually and helping them grow in their faith because they may not have that in their other home. That’s certainly something that we tried to do.

Ron: Gayla, you know in your book *StepParenting with Grace*, you say it’s a privilege to be a stepparent. You talk about that, and I think that’s what you were just referring to. You have the privilege, opportunity to influence a child’s worldview and faith. Boy, that is a pretty awesome task. How do you want stepparents to hold on to that, and see it as a privilege?

Gayla: Well for one, I just want to say, it’s not easy to do that because there are times it might feel more like a burden. So when that suggestion was first given to me, I had to sit back and mull and say, “Wait a minute, you’re not walking in my shoes as a stepmom, but you’re suggesting I consider it a privilege.” So I had to change my perspective and think about the blessings ultimately that you can encounter as a stepparent.

We don’t always see them that easily. Sometimes you have to really look for them. It could be simple things: a text in the middle of the day, laughter around the dinner table. That just tells you you *are* investing in a stepchild’s life. They are looking to you as a person of importance, and that’s a privilege to get to invest in another child in a unique way.

Ron: You had to change your perspective, you said. That makes me wonder, were there times when you really didn’t want this job and really didn’t think of it as a privilege, or as a wonderful opportunity, that it was hard?

Gayla: Certainly! Especially in my situation where I brought two girls into the marriage. So now, I was being pulled. We went from two kids to four overnight. Randy and I both had custody of our kids and so there was a lot of sharing mom, and I didn’t always embrace that. I was used to just parenting my two girls, and that was hard.

Ron: Yes. Then you begin to see things happening with Jamie, and I imagine that pulled on your heartstrings too.

Gayla: It did. Then there’s some guilt in there about, “Oh my goodness, so now, not only did I take Jamie through a divorce, now we have gone into this remarriage and she’s struggling to reunite--or unite to begin with--with a stepdad and step siblings that

she didn't have a choice about, coming into a family like this. So then there was some guilt and yes, definitely being pulled on my heart that, "What am I doing to my kids?"

Ron: And guilt around your own children. Let me make this statement and you guys tell me if you can identify with it or if you think it's right. When you have guilt about what your own children are going through in the blended family, it makes it harder for you to stepparent with grace, to move toward your stepchildren, to invest in them, yes?

Gayla: I would definitely say yes, because you have to guard against blaming your step children for some of the things that are going on with your biological children.

Ron: Oh. Unpack that for me. Blaming them? Why would you blame them?

Gayla: Because in the case of Jamie and her anxiety, I began to think, "Well she can't adjust to all these extra people in the home. If you guys were being nicer to Jamie, this wouldn't be so hard. If Adrienne as her big sister would recognize that Jamie's struggling in this role, then it wouldn't be so hard." So all of a sudden it's easy as a bio mom to see things from your kid's perspective and not be seeing things from your stepchildren's perspective also.

Ron: So when Gayla started sharing all those thoughts and feelings with you, Randy, about your kids and what they could do differently that would help Jamie out, her daughter out, how did that impact you?

Randy: Well, it made it so that we actually began to function a little bit like two triangles in the family. That Adrienne, Peyton and I were secure and knew our roles and Gayla and the girls were secure in their roles. So how did we fit that out? It was a little bit of a retreat, regroup and to come together.

For a visual of this, Ron, is that therapist coming back full circle. The most helpful exercise he did with us, he met with us as a couple and then brought the family in. He asked the kids to set up the family portrait. When they did so, it was unanimous the way it was. I mean Jody was a little bit young to do this exercise but it was Gayla, Jamie and Jody on one side, Gayla and I in the middle touching each other on the couch and then Adrienne, Peyton and Dad on the other side.

I use it as a reference in our presentations that--I put a picture of our wedding picture--because Peyton was my ring bearer. Jamie was a flower girl. Adrienne was the receptionist. Then Jody just had a dress that matched at the time.

But in our picture is it is a clear line between Gayla and I. The girls are on her side, and Adrienne and Peyton are on my side. So even at the wedding, which we didn't know that, but the picture was set up that way and then through some counseling it was set up that way nine months later.

Ron: Wow. So you found yourself living out that picture from your wedding and it just became reality. There was division between the two sides of the family, you and your kids on one side and her and her kids on the other side.

Randy: During our single parenting we had learned to function that way.

Ron: Okay, so Gayla's saying, "Man, if you and your kids would just-- then everything would be better with my daughter and I wouldn't be as anxious, and I wouldn't feel as guilty and she would feel better." So what did you do with that? Did you meet her in the middle or did it kind of push you away from Gayla?

Randy: I felt that we kind of retreated and regrouped. We worked on the *how do we treat each other within the family?* One thing we learned later is to lower your expectations. Though I was maybe more of an authoritarian and wanted to say and do and we have marching orders, that was easy, but I had to realize that I couldn't do that in the family in this situation.

Ron: You had to make some changes.

Randy: Right. Obviously these were young girls. Those expectations of mine were unrealistic and certainly not life and death; therefore let big things be big things and little things be little things. So therefore I could just accept. If the girls weren't going to hurt each other or hurt someone else, did it really matter if it fit my picture?

Ron: Yes. I think that's a really good word. When you find yourself in a situation and you realize, "You know what, we're kind of here, right now we're split. We need to regroup. We need to start working back towards one another again." That's a really good takeaway for people.

Gayla: I think it starts with the couple. The couple has to come back together and say, "Okay, how do we get back on the same page? We're not in agreement on some things that are going on with kids, but as a married couple we have to be the ones to figure this out."

Ron: Let's keep going with that because you talk about that in your book, *StepParenting with Grace*, that the relationship with the couple--meaning they're parents but they're also married--that that gets crossed pretty fast.

And here's a good example of that: like your heart in this whole situation was about Jamie and what you felt like she needed, but quickly that was kind of putting you two on opposite sides of the couch or whatever. So now you're figuring out how to move back toward one another as a couple so you can deal with the parenting.

Gayla: A lot of it takes grace. It comes back to, "I'm going to give grace even though things aren't done the way I think they should be done." Sometimes, Randy parents

differently than I do, but the way he parents isn't wrong, it's just different. I had to accept that. He can get to the same goals in a different way. So I think that we just recognized we needed to set the example and come together and find unity in our parenting.

Randy: Yes, just to jump forward in our family life to the glorious teenage years.

Ron: Did you say "glorious?"

Randy: Yes.

Ron: I know you didn't mean it.

Randy: It is what it is.

Ron: It is what it is.

Randy: But I think a lot of what we went through might happen with any, whether traditional family or not, because the teenage years.... But what I found during that time that worked very, very well is I wanted to quickly come when there was the combativeness between teenagers and Gayla particularly, that daughter relationship first.

I mean obviously if it was my son, I can deal with that and was the most appropriate one to do it. And even though I would sit here and say, "Man, I'm going to jump in this and I'm going to pull this apart. I'm going to set this straight," when I found out that I could sit back, exercise that fruit of the Spirit of self-control, and I could listen and I could get a strategy and Gayla would let me know when she was at her breaking point--it would usually be a word like, "I have had enough." I would go, "Okay, that's my signal."

And by that time, instead of being this aggressive or something, I had been able to form a strategic plan that would try to meet Jamie or the child where they were at, in order to get a healthy resolve and give my wife relief.

Ron: Man, I've got to commend you for that, because I saw the strain on your face as you said the word "self-control." I mean, if our listeners could have been here, like that was agony for you to implement self-control. Man, I'm exaggerating a little bit maybe, I don't know.

But it's like you really had to slow yourself down. You really had to go, "Pause. Keep your mouth shut. Don't engage yet. Don't be so quick on the draw." Yes?

Randy: Exactly.

Ron: What else did you have to tell yourself in order to implement self-control?

Randy: If I want to be an effective partner to my spouse that I cherish, and I want to be of value to this family, and I'm in, we need a win/win.

Ron: Wow, I really love that attitude. You know, it's interesting, that's just a quick application of one fruit of the Spirit: self-control. Right? I think patience is also in that list.

Gayla: It is!

Ron: Gentleness is in that list.

Randy: Love.

Ron: Love.

Randy: Joy.

Ron: That's just a few other things. But it's amazing how powerful those things are when we say, "Okay, you know what? This is a discipleship moment. Do I trust God to be patient? Do I trust God to be in self-control? My flesh is ready to react and do exactly what I want to do, what I know how to do, which I do really, really well.

I need to trust God and slow down, pause and think. You know, that's just a good example of grace, God's grace living out in us, to help us be more than we could've been by ourselves. Yes, it's a big moment for you as an individual, but look at the positive ripple effect throughout the family just by taking that little step and moving in that direction.

Gayla: Then, Randy mentioned the teenage years. I think we need to recognize as our kids move into those years, they're watching us. They're watching our behavior. If we want to teach them self-control, we have to model it. No, it's not always easy. It might take stepping back and counting to ten. I mean you know there's several different methods that people will throw out there. It might mean saying a quick prayer and just pausing before you respond.

Ron: So let's talk about applying grace to a matter of grief. We've talked on this podcast before, it's a natural thing that many blended families experience, it's just a sadness over what has been lost, whether that's a death of a parent, or a divorce, or a parent that's no longer living in the home. The kids may be moving back and forth between parents. Whatever the story is, there's some grief there.

How do you apply grace to other people's grief within your own home?

Randy: Well, Ron, there's some chapters of our life that I think God--and it was told to us one time--that God is building your ministry. And Adrienne and Peyton lost their mother to cancer. So other than the grief of mom and dad, in both cases being divorced,

and the natural grief of the kids just wanting mom and dad to be together, we had to embrace that chapter of life with Adrienne and Peyton, and it was very--it was difficult.

Gayla: We had been married eight years, I believe, when Peyton and Adrienne lost their mom to cancer, so something totally unexpected. We had been walking through grief and other emotions previously as a new blended family, and our relationships had begun to come together. We were feeling encouraged, and then they took some huge strides backwards when this happened, naturally. So then we began walking through grief again in a different way.

Ron: In what way did things take a step back?

Gayla: Well I think for Peyton and Adrienne to then love me as their stepmom when their biological mom was no longer here, felt disloyal to them, very disloyal to them. So even though our relationships had begun to come together, there were some changes. I don't think it was long term. I certainly began to reach out to them the best I could.

The relationships have gone forward again, which I'm thankful for. But I think the thing that sometimes we don't recognize in stepfamilies is we might marry in a certain situation and there could be changes beyond what we expect that can affect stepfamily relationships. We need to be prepared for that.

Ron: So when it happened and you felt them pull away, distance from you, is that the way you experienced it?

Gayla: Yes.

Ron: So what did you tell yourself? How'd you handle that?

Gayla: Well I remember thinking, "I didn't sign up for this." You know I thought that we were doing pretty well in this relationship, and we walked through some storms and I thought things were beginning to settle down. I think I argued with God a little bit about that.

Ron: Of course.

Gayla: Wait a minute!

Ron: Hold on, we've done the hard work.

Gayla: Right.

Ron: We should be enjoying the rewards. Now we're going backwards.

Gayla: Right, Exactly. So even in my life I began to grieve, my own grief, of I was ready to move forward in some good relationships.

Ron: The thought that came to mind just then as you were saying that: it was you had to grieve that you were a stepmom again. Like maybe you weren't feeling so much like a stepmom anymore.

Gayla: Right.

Ron: Then here I am back, "Yep, I'm a stepmom."

Gayla: Well and I think even for Peyton in particular, Peyton was fourteen when his mom passed away and he had been living with Mom for a couple of years and then came back to live with us. There was a change that happened in regards to him and our kids, my girls, and by this time we had had our son together, Nathan. So Peyton had experienced something that none of the other kids had experienced, other than his sister, Adrienne.

Ron: That's right.

Gayla: Now Adrienne started college so she didn't move. She continued where she was. So it affected all of the relationships in our home. That was hard.

Ron: How did you reach out to your son's heart, your daughter's heart after their mother died? I mean, what form did that take?

Randy: Well, obviously being able to sit down and being able to talk to them. I felt that I was questioned, and for either them wanting to understand things better from my perspective--maybe some things they'd been told, whether they were right or wrong--so I just I just had to work through that. But it was like, in a sense I would say I was being interrogated to be worthy to be that custodial parent again.

Ron: That's really interesting. I've got to slow that down. So I'm hearing you say your kids are asking a new set of questions. After mom's death they were asking new questions about the divorce?

Randy: Yes.

Ron: So it brought that back up again, which is really not a surprise, because loss reminds you of loss. But it made them grieve in a new way what the divorce was about, what it meant. Now that we're here with you, how does that move forward and how do I now think of you? That must have been hard for you.

Randy: It was, if you want to say it, a very dark time in my life. After Peyton had gone to live with his mother it was even being an insider/outsider. It's like I came home from

work Monday after taking Peyton to live with his mother, and here's Gayla with her biological kids, even though one of them's mine.

Nathan was blessed with three mothers, having Gayla and Jamie and Jody. It's almost as though I get up and I go to work and I come home and wash the dishes, and my role seemed to change. Obviously I had to work through that.

Ron: That was really difficult. After your former wife passed away, then Gayla, you had to deal with the kids pulling away from you, so there's more transition there. You know one of the things that's true about blended families is you know there's always that sense that step relationships are not biological relationships. Even though they can be strong and powerful and really, really positive, and filled with love, you're kind of reminded that it's not the same.

It's kind of like, I have a brother-in-law who married my sister, and Kent means the world to me. I introduce him as my brother, my wife introduces him as her brother; they're not related at all by blood, except by double marriage. I'm not sure how to say that; they're twice in-laws or "outlaws," they call it of themselves. Man, he's family to me, but we don't have the same last name. I mean, clearly there's a difference in our relationship, even though it's a great one.

I think sometimes step parents can forget that, and then there's something comes along like this and you're reminded once again that you're not the parent. That's a moment you've got to put on some more grace, because they need you to kind of be dealing and helping yourself through that moment, not putting it on the children to help you get through that moment. Do you think that's a fair statement?

Randy: Yes.

Gayla: Yes. I think, too, we need to remind ourselves as stepparents that even if it feels the relationship isn't where we want it to be, it doesn't mean that it's our fault. There are things that happen in relationships; our stepchildren are viewing us through their own eyes and through their experiences that have an impact on the relationship. Sometimes we do carry guilt as a stepparent, in ways that might hinder the relationship, because we're not viewing it fairly to ourselves.

Ron: You've been listening to my conversation with Randy and Gayla Grace. I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended®.

If you've ever taught a child to drive, you've got a story. Randy and Gayla do, too. That story is coming up. But do you remember Gayla's observation that when her stepchildren's mother died, Gayla's relationship with her stepchildren took a step back? They had gained two steps forward but then it took a step back.

This is an important observation, I think, for all blended families. It might not be a death in your situation that results in the step back, but it's pretty common for family transitions, or a change in circumstance, or a child just growing up and breaching a new season in their life. Those things can bring about a step back in your family relationships.

The circumstance kind of brings loyalties to the surface and it can affect how things go in your family. I mention this today because I think sometimes people get a little paranoid. Sometimes they think, "What's wrong with us?" Actually you're quite normal, this is a pretty predictable process.

So don't panic if this happens to you. Don't overreact. Recognize what it is. Take a deep breath, see it as an opportunity to help each other again deal with loss and the choice to love.

Randy and Gayla's final thought is coming up in just a minute.

If you would like more information about our guests, you can find it in our show notes. Check it out at the FamilyLife Blended® page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts. Lots of interesting stuff there. You can take a look at additional resources, links, and you can learn about our other podcasts on the FamilyLife Podcast Network.

I do want you to know we enjoy hearing from you. Your feedback means a lot to us. Positive reviews online, those are appreciated as well.

You can subscribe to this podcast if you haven't already on iTunes, or Stitcher, or wherever you download your podcast. Just search FamilyLife® Blended with Ron Deal. And maybe, if you like what you hear, you'll help us out a little bit, spread the word, tell a friend, a pastor, maybe a family member about this podcast. We'd appreciate that. It means a lot to us.

Maybe you can post something online about the FamilyLife Blended podcast.

Gayla's book again is called *StepParenting with Grace*. It's available wherever books are sold.

Please give some thought to joining us at the Summit on Stepfamily Ministry, October 24 and 25, 2019. It'll be in Chesapeake, Virginia this year. It's a two-day, ministry-equipping event for people who want to learn more about blended families and how to do ministry in a local church or community.

If you're brand new to blended ministry, we'll give you all the basics. And if you've got a ministry up and running in your church, we're going to try to help you network and take it to the next level. Learn all about it at SummitonStepfamilies.com. That's SummitonStepfamilies.com.

And remember you can always find articles, videos, and resources, information about our *Smart Stepfamily* series of books and curriculum. All of that's available at FamilyLife.com/Blended.

Okay, here's that driving story from Randy and Gayla:

Gayla: Honestly, I mean driving is hard. Teaching kids to drive is hard, even as a biological parent. But Randy as the step parent did a better job of that than I did. I would get nervous. I would lose my temper. I would-- and Randy was able to find some humor in it and just do it.

Randy: I love this story. Jamie's sport was being a cheerleader, whatever your twist is on that.

Ron: [Laughs]

Randy: So I would go across town and pick her up from cheerleading to bring her back home. So I stopped in a neighborhood right before you got to our neighborhood and it was just a horseshoe.

Ron: Okay.

Randy: So I stopped and pulled in. She's like, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I was thinking I would let you drive through this neighborhood." "Oh, okay." So we get over there. She does the "U" fine, no screeching the tires, no almost hitting cars. I mean it was--

Ron: That's a good thing.

Randy: Yes, it was good. So we come out and so we're going to turn, all we have to go is like one block to turn into our neighborhood. I said, "Why don't you go ahead and drive the rest of the way to the house." But that's out on a *real* street at this point. And we were waiting, and we were waiting, and I was like, "Are we going to go?" She goes, "Well I see cars."

[Laughter]

So we literally waited until she could not see a car left or right. So not only were there two lanes, there was a left turn lane. So then she pulled out in the road, in the middle of the road. Then she kind of stopped. I said, "Are you going to go?" She goes, "Are all these lanes mine?"

Ron: [Laughs] And you began to rethink this whole thing about letting her drive.

Randy: No, I just answered her. I said, “Clearly--” I said, “The one on the right preferably.” So we got home without scar. It was fun.

Ron: If that’s not an illustration of grace, I don’t know what is. Finding your calm in the midst of that little storm. That’s amazing that you were able to hold that together.

Next time we’ll hear from Mike and Kim Anderson as they talk about how they handled this surprise on the night before their wedding.

Kim: Yes, I have a five-year-old daughter going in, like I said, and she really adored Mike. They had a great connection and things were going really well there. But of course, the night before the wedding she pulls me aside and says, “I don’t want you to marry Mike.” I’m like blindsided.

Ron: That’s Mike and Kim Anderson, next time on FamilyLife Blended®.

I’m Ron Deal, thanks for listening. Thanks to our FamilyLife Legacy Partners for making this podcast available. Our chief audio engineer is Keith Lynch. Bruce Goff, our producer. Our mastering engineer is Justin Adams. Theme music provided by Braden Deal.

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