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Episode 30: Re-Sex: The Challenges of Sex for Blended Family Couples

Guests: Dr. Juli Slattery

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Ron: Hey, now today's conversation is very candid. Little warning here, you don't want to listen in the car with the children around, if you catch my drift. Also, let me tell you up front there's some great bonus material mentioned in the show notes for additional study. I'll talk a little bit more about that later but make sure you take a look.

Juli: Ron, I think a lot of the anxiety and fear comes from the fact that we're going into marriage with the wrong understanding of the purpose of sexuality. Because sexuality really isn't supposed to be about this great performance that we're enjoying or even about always pleasing each other. But when you think that that's what it's about, then there is a fear of, "What if it isn't good?" or "How do we fix it if it isn't good?"

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

Today we're talking about sex. And it's a doozy. Now before we jump into my conversation with Dr. Juli Slattery, let me tell you that we just wrapped our latest *Blended and Blessed* livestream event. It was fantastic. I just want you to know, if you missed it, you can go to the show notes and find out how you can access that video streaming online.

Should you ask your spouse about their previous sex life? What if you find yourself thinking about sex with your former spouse, is that a problem? What if your spouse is thinking about sex with their former spouse, should you be concerned about that? And what if there are clear differences in your sex life now and then, before, what do you do with that? How do you keep those differences from being a problem?

Healthy marital sexuality is important to the vitality of any marriage. More and more couples find themselves in what I like to call a "re-sex" situation. They're in a second or subsequent sexual situation. Whether the story is death, divorce, relationship dissolution, one or both partners has had a sexual relationship with at least one other person prior to the current marriage.

How does this affect the current marital sexual relationship? How do you keep the past out of your relationship present?

That's the focus of today's episode on *FamilyLife Blended*.

Let me just say something as we get rolling here. Sexuality touches the deepest parts of us. That's why it can elicit fear and anger and disgust and pleasure and surrender and joy and peace.

God knows all of that, by the way, which is one reason He puts boundaries around it. Because He knows it can bring great joy or pain depending on how it enters our life, depending upon how we approach this thing called sexuality. We should not be surprised that re-sex relationships will have the same affect.

As you listen to my conversation with Dr. Juli Slattery, let me ask you to do something, pay attention to what rises up inside you. Those emotions are telling you something about you, so pay attention.

Dr. Juli Slattery is a friend and colleague. My wife loves her thoughtful and insightful presentations on relationships and sexuality. Juli's a clinical psychologist, an author, a speaker and she's the president and co-founder of Authentic Intimacy, a ministry dedicated to reclaiming God's design for sexuality. I highly recommend this to you.

Every Monday she hosts a podcast called *Java with Juli*, where she and a guest sit down and have coffee and honest conversation about relationships, sex, intimacy, pornography, singleness, and God's design for our sex lives.

I've had the honor of being on that podcast, have listened to many of her podcasts. Again, I highly recommend it. Juli's the author of 10 books, including *Finding the Hero in Your Husband*, *Passion Pursuit*, and her latest, *Rethinking Sexuality*. She and her husband, Mike, are the parents of three sons, and they live in Akron, Ohio.

Now, here's my conversation with Dr. Juli Slattery:

How comfortable do you think the average person is with this idea, "If you died and your spouse married somebody else and started having sex?" How comfortable do you think the average person is with that idea?

Juli: Wow, I think most people haven't thought about it. [Laughter] But yes, I haven't thought about it really. That's, that's a weird thought.

Ron: It is. It's like—and the reason I chose that question to start our conversation is because I think it reveals something in us, like why do we not think about that? That's a distinct possibility for anybody in life.

When you do go there in your mind it's like, "Oh, I'm not sure how I feel about that." This thing called sex is *the* most intimate experience we have on earth. The idea of thinking

about that happening to somebody I love and care for, on some level that's got to be uncomfortable.

Juli: Yes, and I think it should be uncomfortable when we look at, even in 1 Corinthians where Paul says that if you're married your body belongs to your spouse. It's like, okay, if our bodies belong to each other then I don't want to think about sharing *his* body with somebody else. I think it's probably natural to have that sense of, "Wait, he's mine."

Ron: Yes.

Juli: Like in the hypothetical scenario you're saying there's a death—I think it's even more difficult if there's a divorce thinking about, "I'm still alive but my husband's body is now with somebody else." Yes, that's a natural disconnect that we would have.

Ron: Of course, that's people who are listening to us right now. They have experienced that, the death or a divorce in a previous relationship and now *they* are the ones who are engaging in a sexual relationship with their current spouse.

That's the nature of our conversation today: what's unique and different about that and how can we encourage people to have a healthy sexual relationship in their life? Really, that's the question we're going to dive into. How do previous sexual experiences impact step couple satisfaction with their sexual relationship?

I just want to say up front that you and I are diving into new territory. What I mean by that is, there's not been much research around this from a Christian point of view or a secular point of view. I've looked. There's really not much out there.

That fascinates me. Why haven't we asked those questions in this field? Why haven't we gathered better information? David Olsen and I did a study a number of years ago, wrote a book *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*. We did ask a few questions but not enough.

Here's something I want you to just react to, okay? We talk about in that book unhappy couples versus really happy stepfamily couples. Unhappy couples are four times as likely to be concerned about how their partner's previous sexual experiences will impact their relationship. What do you think might be behind that concern?

Juli: Well, I think there probably are a few things. One of them could be that the focus is not on, "How are we bonding? How are we enjoying each other?" The focus is on the past. Sometimes when the present isn't strong, it's not satisfying, it's not fulfilling. We start asking questions of, "Why isn't it?" Maybe our sex life isn't as good as it was with a previous partner or in a previous marriage.

I think that might be part of it. But also, as you know, Ron, there's a really high correlation between satisfying marriages and satisfying sex lives. There's an argument

about which came first the chicken or the egg. You know, what creates the satisfaction first? It probably goes both ways. But if you're in a marriage that isn't happy and isn't fulfilling and isn't satisfying, the chances are that's going to be true of sexual intimacy as well. Not always the case, but there's a pretty high correlation.

I think it would be natural to begin asking more questions, to be wondering, to be comparing, even to have a little bit of maybe fear or paranoia that, "This part of our relationship isn't good and how do I fix it?" So that doesn't surprise me.

Ron: Yes, let's unpack that because you just said a mouthful. I heard in there comparisons. I heard the past entering the present. I heard, in there, our relationship outside the bedroom affects our relationship inside the bedroom. There's a bunch there. Let's chase a little bit at a time.

Let's talk about fear and anxiety as it relates to what we bring to a sexual relationship. Can you just talk around that for a little bit?

Juli: Yes. The more I work with couples and with women on sexual topics the more I realize that one of the big problems is that we have a misunderstanding of the purpose of sex even within marriage. Nobody's really teaching on that. We talk about sex being reserved for marriage. I think that's a pretty common theme within Christian teaching.

But nobody talks about, "Well, what should sex be *doing* for us in marriage?" What we tend to do is we tend to just bring in our cultural understanding of sex even into marriage. The cultural understanding of sex is about, "Are we pleasing each other? Are we having a good time? Is your body sexy? How are you performing?"

We even have this idea of—people will say before they get married, "We've got to try it before we buy it," like, "Let's make sure we're sexually compatible."

If you're entering into marriage with that mindset, then there's going to be a lot of fear and anxiety over whether sex in marriage is going to be good and whether you're going to be good enough, your partner's going to be good enough. Then you add to it previous experience or previous marriage and there's all kinds of comparison.

Ron, I think a lot of the anxiety and fear comes from the fact that we're going into marriage with the wrong understanding of the purpose of sexuality because sexuality really isn't supposed to be about this great performance that we're enjoying or even about always pleasing each other.

But when you think that that's what it's about, then there's a fear of "What if it isn't good?" or "How do we fix it if it isn't good?"

Ron: Yes, so what are the purposes? Some people say, “So you have children.” Okay, that’s one. Is there more to it than that? That just feels like that’s about having kids; that’s not necessarily about us.

Juli: Yes, really the primary purpose of sex is—if you can think of it almost like a sacrament. When I use that word, we think of sacraments being, for example, communion or baptism. But a sacrament is a *physical* thing that we do to mark or to remember a spiritual truth.

We regularly take communion if you’re a Christian because you want to remember that Christ is in me and I’ve received the gift of His body and His blood. You do that regularly to remember it.

In the same way, sex is a way that we physically do something on a regular basis to remember the spiritual truth of what we’ve promised each other. That we’ve promised each other, “I belong to you. You belong to me. We’re one flesh. We’re united. We’re doing life together. We love each other and we’re faithful to each other.”

Sex is a physical way that we’re marking that or remembering that. I love the way Timothy Keller says it. He says that for a married couple, sex is like a covenant renewal ceremony. Almost like you’re getting married over again every time you have sex because you’re remembering with your bodies the vows that you made to each other, which really is a paradigm shift for a lot of people.

Ron: Absolutely, because now your focus is on remembering your vows and the promise and living that out, not just inside the bedroom with the experience of pleasure, but outside the bedroom in the experience of serving and loving one another.

I’ve often thought of it as God’s little marital ecosystem. It’s the peace that brings us back to the heart of our covenant over and over and over again.

Okay, Juli, react to this. Because I’ve had conversations with people who have said, “Wow, that’s kind of great, Ron. There’s some sort of spiritual connection there. But I don’t know. That just feels like it’s sterile or it’s not so much about pleasure or it’s not so much about....”

But there’s really this room for all of that to engage, to be part of the picture, right?

Juli: Right, yes. Think about the rest of your marriage. There’s times that you laugh together. There’s times that you go on vacation and really enjoy each other. But then there are difficult times where you’re disagreeing and you’re working through problems together.

The same should be true of our sex lives where all of that should be represented in how we’re trying to become physically one flesh. There’s certainly times of joy and

celebration and even ecstasy where this is fun and it feels good. But in most married couples there's equal amount of times where sex is a source of conflict, maybe even pain because you hurt each other or you just get so frustrated that you can't figure out how to enjoy this gift that you have.

If you look at sex as a reflection of, and again, a celebration of the rest of marriage it gives you the context for what you do when you go through a season that's difficult. Everything about marriage has seasons that are difficult. We know how, in some ways, to navigate those. Let's apply those same principles when we encounter a difficulty with sexuality.

I think most people don't anticipate that they're going to have problems with sexual intimacy because everybody seems to present it as, "If you married the right person and you're compatible, this is always going to be something that's filled with pleasure."

Ron: I want to bring this back to blended family couples. What we just talked about is news to some of our listeners. They have *never* heard that thought before. Sex has always just been about pleasure. It's always been about what I can get or what the other person will take from me.

You just said, at a fundamental level it's about giving, it's about oneness, it's about promise, it's about reminders, it's about connecting, it's about loving one another in a holistic way, not just the physical sexual part, but in a holistic way.

That's far deeper and wider and they're going, "Yes, but I'm just worried about whether or not I do sex right." We're back to performance. I'm back to that anxiety issue.

I'm just sitting here going, "Man, my first husband or wife liked sex this way and we kind of got into that groove. Now I'm finding myself going, 'Is that still the way you have sex?'" People get wrapped up in their brain at that point.

Juli: Yes, yes.

Ron: Their head is full of thoughts in the middle of trying to engage in a sexual experience. That doesn't really help, does it?

Juli: No, no it doesn't. What ends up happening is you have two private sexual experiences where the wife has her own fears, her own insecurities, her own desires, and she doesn't know how to articulate those. The husband has his own. Although they might be sharing their bodies, that's *all* they're sharing.

You can be married for decades and not actually have ever experienced true oneness or sexual intimacy. It's always been about your own thoughts and your own response and your own fears or even your own pleasure. It's never become about a shared journey.

If you're in that space, I'd encourage you to do two things: number one, start talking about sex. It's key to begin to learn to verbalize some of the fears you have and expectations. For a lot of couples the best way to do that is to react to a podcast like this or to another resource that brings up these topics for you. That's the first thing is to talk about it.

The second thing that's really important is to keep learning about it. I don't know why we have this assumption that great sex just naturally happens or that you're just going to be able to navigate these conflicts around sexuality. We seek out resources and help for every area of marriage or life. Why is sex different? Why do we believe that it just should magically happen?

Ron: Or even worse, we seek out pornography or erotic novels that seem to send the message, "It's all about the pleasure and it's all about what I get." It has nothing to do with give. It has nothing to do with a holistic view of the relationship.

Now that is ramping up the performance anxiety because somehow we've got to achieve that. I've got to become an Olympic pole vaulter overnight because I saw that person do it. They went over 19 feet. Surely I can accomplish that and I've got to make my spouse go over the same bar. We just ramp up all this pressure—

Juli: Yes.

Ron: —in the sexual relationship.

Juli: Yes, really what pornography's doing is reinforcing that lie—

Ron: Yes.

Juli: —that sex is all about bodies and performance and the greatest pleasure you can experience, instead of confronting those lies with truth about really even what the research shows about who's having the best sex. It's not the people that are looking at pornography and going after this great experience. It's the people that are in long-term committed relationships that are learning to communicate about sex and learning together.

Although society's really presenting one thing as the solution, that solution doesn't work. The solution is to continue to learn about what sex was intended to be and how we get good at it.

Ron: Okay let's push, I want to push you on this. Talk about your fears and learn how to communicate about your sexual relationship. You're feeling some of this performance stuff. You're feeling some of this anxiety and your suggestion is to talk about that.

Now here is what's ironic about that to me is, for a lot of people talking about their sexual experience, whether it's what they like or don't like or what their fears or concerns are within the sexual relationship, is far more naked than actually having sex.

Juli: Yes.

Ron: They won't do it. They won't talk about it. Somebody's listening to us and they're going, "Oh no, I'd rather just be naked and have sex and not actually share what's going on inside my brain with my spouse." What do they do?

Juli: Yes, well first of all you have to ask yourself the question, are you just going to settle for this cheap imitation of what God designed this to be? Because you're probably still listening to this podcast episode because there's a part of you that's saying, "This should be more. This should be better. Why is it so frustrating?"

We have a choice to make, not just with the sexual relationship, but with marriage in general. I can either choose to be isolated or I can choose to be vulnerable. You can't get true intimacy without the risk of vulnerability.

That's really true in the sexual relationship. It doesn't mean that you just have one big conversation where you just kind of vomit all your fears and all your past experiences. That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about creating the emotional environment where it becomes normal to have conversations that gently push into some of these issues we're talking about.

For some couples, I think maybe they're ready to have a very deep serious conversation about sexuality. But for most couples, this is so intimidating and can represent so many landmines that you learn to tiptoe towards them first.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: Which is why, again, listening to a podcast like this or reading a good Christian book on sex together helps you begin those conversations with the right words and with the right context.

Ron: Oh, that's so good. I would love for people to be using this dialog as just such a catalyst for them to go the next level. It's going to pull up pain. It's going to pull up fear.

We have to push through that I think is what I hear you saying. We have to find a way to calm ourselves in the midst of that anxiety and push ourselves through it in order to find the intimacy that's on the other side.

Juli: Right, exactly. Particularly if you've been through trauma related to sexuality, whether it was a previous marriage or even childhood trauma, if there's a lot of

insecurity, if there's secrets that you're keeping related to sexual temptation or experiences—

Ron: If there was a betrayal in a previous relationship, it leaves that residue on your heart and makes it hard to trust.

Juli: —or a current struggle with lust or pornography. It's like, "Wow, I don't want to go there. That's how my last marriage ended."

There are all these potential landmines that keep us from being honest. But if we stay in that place of not addressing those issues, we will have a less-than-intimate marriage. Not just in the bedroom but that flows over into every other aspect of our emotional intimacy.

I really believe that, for a lot of couples the sex life is actually an invitation to begin foraging new paths of intimacy in every aspect of their marriage, because it's so tangible and because it's so vulnerable.

Ron: I think one of the things —I'd love for you to react to this—that we have to sometimes do is ask God to help us hold on to our fear and to maybe shift it outside of ourselves.

If somebody's in a scenario listening today and they're going, "Yes, past relationship, there was betrayal, there was hurt," or maybe it was just a dissatisfying sex life and it just was never great. So you just have a poor idea of it. You're not really sure about it.

"Hey, I learned to live without it. I could learn to live without it again this time." Whatever that past residue is that's still with you that creates some anxiety or some fear about being honest and talking through sex, it's like, I have to move that outside of myself and asking God for help with that, for some people, is a hard move. Like, "I don't want to talk to God about anything related to my sex life." [Laughter] "That is like too weird and vulnerable."

Juli: Yes, yes, but that's where healing happens. We don't heal in secret. We just don't. When we feel like something is too vulnerable or too messy to even bring to God, it means we're carrying it by ourselves. That's really where the enemy does his work, building lies, building fears, building shame.

Taking one little step towards authenticity, towards confession, towards asking the Lord's help, towards having a conversation with your spouse about some of these issues that are so painful.

In my experience, I've just have seen over and over again, God really meet people with that one step with grace and with "Wow, I thought He would respond this way but instead He responded that way," or "I have so much more peace about this now that

I've spoken it out loud." It is a scary step but you really can't forge intimacy or healing without it.

Ron: So many practical, good things in this conversation with Juli Slattery. Thank you. We're talking about holding onto your pain and fear from the past and talking and getting real, getting naked about your sex life with your spouse so that you can get naked and have a sex life.

We've talked about inviting the Lord in to help you deal with some of those things and combatting the lies that we get from culture, from pornography, even perhaps from the past.

One more thing I wanted to ask you about that, I think is an anxiety producer for some people is they manage their sexual self like a critical parent. "Ron, you are such a disappointment in the bedroom." I mean, that kind of self-talk really is hard. Or they manage themselves like a jaded ex-spouse. "Man, nobody wants you."

Juli: Yes.

Ron: That's the little message they're telling themselves outside the bedroom and that carries inside the bedroom even into the sexual experience. Maybe they're telling themselves that even in the midst of a sexual moment. What do they do with those negative thoughts when people uncover those?

Juli: The first thing is uncovering them. I think a lot of times you have those thoughts in your mind. You never verbalize them. You never even acknowledge them for yourself but they just are basically joy killers and libido killers.

If you are in the middle of a sexual experience with your spouse and those kind of fears or thoughts are going through your mind, then it's like a giant stop sign. It's like forcing yourself to go through motions. There's no freedom.

The first thing we've got to do is we've got to recognize, "That's what I'm thinking after every time we're intimate. That's what goes through my mind." That can be a real "aha" moment just to acknowledge that, to say it out loud.

But then the next question is, "Okay, where did that come from?" You can look at, well, it came from my former spouse, it came from a message in childhood, it came from something I say to protect myself.

But ultimately you want to ask the question, "Did that come from God or did that come from the enemy?" That's something that I have to ask myself a lot when I get caught up in wrong thinking is, "Is that thought from God or not?"

Those kinds of thoughts that you were mentioning are not from God because they don't bring freedom. It really is the accuser that wants to discourage you—

Ron: Yes.

Juli: —and wants to basically throw a wet blanket on sexual intimacy within your marriage. One thing I guess I've learned over the last several years both in ministry and in my own life is that you have to fight for sexual intimacy in your marriage. It's a spiritual battle. It's a relational battle.

If you just go on autopilot, those kinds of thoughts, conflict, you name it, just the resentment that can build, it will overtake intimacy in your marriage. You have to actively be fighting for it. That's one way to fight for it.

Ron: If it's a sacrament, as you said, and I believe that you're right about that, the enemy is going to try to steal that away from you—

Juli: Yes.

Ron: —because there's so much value in it. Of course he's going to attack that part of our lives. By the way, I think maybe we could word it many different ways but I think maybe the message God would give somebody about their sexual self is *abandon*.

Be a playful child. Just jump in. It's like watching kids in the ball pit at McDonalds, like they just jump in with abandon or in a swimming pool, like they're just having so much fun and they're laughing and enjoying themselves. I think that's the message God would give us about our sexual self.

Juli: Yes, I think that's certainly an aspect of it. When you read Song of Solomon, you see this sexual play, you see playing together and planning a sexual escapade together and you also see God's blessing of that. For sure, that's part of the gift that God gives a couple with sexuality.

But sex can also be a source of comfort. Even through a grief time or a stressful time, it can be "This is a way that we can connect physically where we can't connect anywhere else right now. We're having trouble talking. We're having trouble communicating."

If you add this bigger picture of a variety of gifts that sex can offer you as a couple, there are going to be those seasons of jumping in the ball pits and abandoning and just having fun and laughing and enjoying great pleasure.

But there's also going to be seasons of, "Okay, how do we love each other well through this difficult season where we're not communicating?" or "there's conflict?" or "there's grief?"

Ron: I'd like to chase some other things that I think could be potential anxiety producers for couples in blended families in particular.

Let's just start with this, what if somebody's having random sexual thoughts about a former spouse; like they're not trying to entertain that, it's just coming on? Or what if somebody is worried that *their* spouse might be having sexual thoughts about their former spouse? What do we do with those?

Juli: Yes, I think one of the misnomers of our day is we define our sexuality by what we think about. We put way too much stock in a thought that goes through our mind.

Again, this is where I think the enemy has a lot of fun with us, where you have a thought about a former spouse or let's say you even have a sexual fantasy. You're like, "Why would I think of that? That must mean that..."

Ron: Yes, I've heard people say that about their dreams. "I woke up. I had this dream. Does that mean...?"

Juli: Right, exactly, but it's a thought. We're not defined by our thoughts. As a matter of fact, the Scripture tells us to take our thoughts captive.

I love the way Linda Dillow puts it. She says, "We can't control what comes into our mind but we can control what stays there."

Often I think even the fears and accusations that can come with our thoughts keep that thought staying there. Like, "Wow, if I'm thinking about this past relationship that must mean this about me" or "It must mean this about my current relationship." Instead just kick it out. Just say, "I don't want that thought. Get out of here."

Ron: Yes.

Juli: Have a replacement thought of, "That's not who I am anymore. That's not who I'm covenanted with anymore. That's not what I want to focus on anymore."

Ron: At that point you focus on what is the truth about—

Juli: Right.

Ron: —who I am, in God, in Christ, about my marriage. "I'm having this worry that he's thinking about his former wife. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. All that's doing is adding to my fear. No, that's not. Do I see any evidence? No, I don't see any evidence of that." Yes, that's the replacement thought.

Juli: Yes, and that takes the power away from our thoughts and uses it in a positive way.

Ron: Yes. Oh, that's good. I'm wondering about stress. I talk a lot about blended family couples and in particular during what we call the integration years where they're doing the hard work of becoming a family and trying to merge all these relationships. Stress runs very, very high.

Stress affects sexual desire and libido and interest and all kinds of things. That can be a killer of what happens in the bedroom. Let's talk around that for a second.

Juli: Yes, there are lots of different elements to that. One of the things that can emerge from that is typically, this is not always the case, but men will view sex as a way of relaxing. "Hey, this is a haven where even for a moment we can experience some pleasure and some peace in the middle of the chaos."

Typically women will say, "I can't have sex unless I relax. Are you crazy? This is the last thing on my mind."

Ron: Poor timing, Buddy. [Laughter]

Juli: It's always poor timing because there's always stress.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: They'll be more likely to say, "Let's get our lives together. Let's get the children under control before we even think about this." That can be a real source of conflict in how you navigate sexual issues as a husband and wife during a season of great stress.

I think one of things that's really key, and I mention this as a husband's usually better at doing this, but building sexual intimacy even in the physical space of your home as a haven, as something that you learn to and train yourself to look forward to as a sanctuary from the stress.

Some very practical ways of doing that would be, number one, make sure there's locks on your doors, on your bedroom door so that you're not worried about kids coming in. Painting your bedroom and decorating it so that it feels like, "Hey, this is for us."

There's not dirty laundry everywhere. There's not reminders of the kids everywhere. But investing some time and money and saying even physically, "We want our bedroom to represent a place that we can go to relax and get away from what is just going to be a demanding season for a while."

With a blended family there are so few boundaries that feel sacred, that I think even having a physical space of a boundary in the bedroom where kids aren't allowed just to come in without asking, it's your space says a lot.

I think you also need to do that related to time, probably more than in a first marriage situation. You need to schedule sexual intimacy and make sure that it's not just, "Oh, we said we'd do it tonight. Let's get it over with." But, "We're going to schedule an extended amount of time to connect, physically, emotionally, spiritually, to relax together."

If you're not proactive about doing that, then sex is probably going to look like the rest of your life is right now, very hectic, like not done well, not focused on. You got to make it a priority.

Ron: I love that. I also think one of the things that couples can do is learn how to be really patient with each other and with themselves. If you're the higher interest partner and maybe it was your idea and the other one's going, "I don't feel relaxed," learning how to relax together.

Maybe lay in bed and hold each other. Maybe that leads to some comfortable caressing or kissing or something. Maybe that leads to—sometimes you just have to physically put yourself in that place, so you can relax, so your body can wake up. Sometimes just laying together, partially naked just allows skin to touch and your body begins to wake up to that idea.

There's about fifteen decisions that had to take place before you got to where you could relax. The patience factor is really important there. If somebody's demanding and somebody's pulling and the other one's going, "No, no, no, no," pulling away, now we're never going to get there.

Juli: Yes, that just adds a tension.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: It doesn't bring relaxation.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: I know couples, for example, that three times a week they take a bath together in the evening. That's just their thing. It's how they talk. It's how they connect. Sometimes it leads to sexual intimacy, sometimes it doesn't.

Ron: There's the important thing, sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. There's not necessarily an expectation. That's just creating closeness that helps to waken sexual energy.

Juli: Right and provides the space for what's even more important, which is just intimate connection of, "Nobody's interrupting us. We can talk. We can pray. We can laugh. We can be naked together. We can enjoy each other."

Again, I think when you put so much emphasis on sexual activity, you forget that what's more important is that space to connect in many different ways. It's not just about that one action.

Ron: Yes. Let me connect another dot when I think about blended family couple stress, integration years, having to work hard. Feeling unchosen is a theme that I've run into with people.

It's not, "I don't feel chosen sexually. I feel unchosen, my spouse tends to favor their kids."

We have this whole, "I'm the stepparent. I'm trying to find my place in the home. I don't always feel included. I feel like an outsider and I'm powerless. I really am struggling with my relationship with my stepkids so I feel a little rejection there. I feel like my spouse isn't quite on my side."

They feel unchosen outside the bedroom. "How do I now make myself vulnerable to this same person inside the bedroom?" That can be a problem.

Juli: Yes, it sure can. Really any conflict, like the one you're bringing up that's happening outside of the bedroom, is going to play out in intimacy because it's an area where you now feel vulnerable, you feel insecure, you feel like, "I've got to put a wall up."

You might find yourself in that situation reacting, overreacting to little things. Like, let's say you initiate sex one night and your spouse isn't in the mood for it or brushes you off. Now that fear of being unchosen is triggered. It's not just about one night where your spouse didn't want to have sex. Now it represents this whole reaction of, "You're choosing your kids over me. You don't really love me. I don't really belong here. This isn't my space."

Again, that's where our thoughts take over and begin to really destroy any sense of security or intimacy. I know you're a big believer in this, Ron. But that's why it's so important to have a place where you can talk these things through, whether it's in counseling, a mentoring couple.

But these are all predictable things that a blended family is going to encounter. If you don't encounter them, you're probably in the minority. Get ahead of the game. Don't be surprised when they happen but have resources in place that help you navigate instead of getting stuck in that fear and insecurity.

Ron: You know it strikes me. We keep coming back to that theme: pain from the past, fear of what's happening in the present, adds up to a disruption in my sexual experience and what I'm able to give and how that goes.

When you add to it maybe something happening in the bedroom that's not feeling right, that just adds fuel to the fire of my fear. Now it's cascading over every aspect of our relationship: parenting, money issues, how we communicate, whether or not we communicate. Certainly it ripples into the sexual arena as well.

That's one of those things that I've come back to over and over again. David Olsen and I, in our book on *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, found that fear predicted with 93 percent accuracy whether couples had really strong relationships in a blended family or very poor relationships in a blended family.

I think it's this very line of conversation we're having. It cascades negativity into every aspect of your life. To me the insidious thing about that is, if I can't recognize my own fear—I mean typically what people do is they start beginning to put expectation on the partner.

“Hey, our sex life isn't going great,” or, “Hey, our money isn't going right,” “This parenting stuff isn't going right so you need to start acting in a way that I won't be fearful anymore.”

Well, it's nice if they're joining in the process. But what if they're not? What if they don't see it the way you see it? Now you're really in a situation where it's almost a stalemate. You're not going to see any improvement from them. You have to turn back to self and say, “What am I afraid of?”

Juli: Yes.

Ron: “What is this thing inside me? What has it got me thinking? What are the lies?” as you've been discussing, and “What do I do with that lie?”

Juli: Yes, absolutely. I was just talking with a couple a few weeks ago that described this so well. The wife was being triggered by certain things that were happening or that the husband was saying. They were little things. The husband was like, “I don't get it. Why does she flip out when this happens?”

I was explaining to both of them what was being triggered from the past and it clicked for him. He said, “It's like when this happens there's this sleeping dragon that she has in her heart and it wakes up and I'm feeling the fury of the dragon.”

Ron: Yes, what a metaphor. [Laughter]

Juli: Yes, I was like, “That's a great word picture.”

But I think what you're saying is really key here, Ron, that we want to be sensitive to one another's triggers. That's part of working this out is, “When you say this, it makes

me feel this,” or “When you reject me in this way, it brings up this fear.” That is part of communication.

But you can't stop there. You have to do the work of saying, “I want to get rid of these triggers. I want to find out what the dragon is that's being triggered down deep inside because it's not probably about my relationship with my spouse. It probably goes back to the last time I was deeply wounded. It probably goes back to my fear that became a reality ten years ago.”

If I don't deal with that, then basically I'm asking my husband or wife to walk on eggshells for the rest of our lives.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: Again, that's why the work of counseling, the work that you do with the Lord and just growing in your faith and confronting fears, that's why it's so central to building an intimate marriage, because otherwise you're really limited in the capacity of intimacy that you can have.

Ron: Not only will the intimacy in *this* relationship be limited, but if this relationship were to end and you took that fear into the *next* relationship, guess what? You're going to end up in similar places with the same fears. Eventually the fear travels with you.

Juli: Yes, the dragon just gets bigger.

Ron: Exactly, exactly and you have more evidence. “See, the last three men in my life, the last...” whatever “...they've all proven that. Therefore all men....” Well, you're still externalizing that fear rather than going, “What is the piece in me that I need to own?”

Yes, it is also about the other, but it's the bigger piece in you, the bigger dragon, that you got to figure out how to put the fire out so it's not [Laughter] blowing fire on you all over the place.

Well, maybe some other themes that we can talk about—we've talked a little bit about comparison as well. It seems to me we could put comparisons in the real or imagined category.

Here's a couple of real ones. “Why can't you touch me the way he or she did?” Would you ever say that to a spouse? Would you recommend that couples do that? [Laughter] I know the answer to that.

Juli: No. [Laughter] Yes, you gave me a softball there.

Ron: Yes, I did.

Juli: I think you could say, “I really like to be touched like this.” That’s teaching your spouse how to love you well. We need to do that in every marriage because you don’t come with an owner’s manual. [Laughter]

Ron: Again, we’re back to when you were talking about earlier communicating, I was thinking, “Yes, verbal intercourse.” Verbal intercourse is me telling you about me and my fears, my concerns, what I like, what’s pleasurable, what’s not pleasurable. You have verbal intercourse so you can have sexual intercourse, if I could say it like that.

That is so very important. Now, again, that means you’re vulnerable because you have to articulate what is good and pleasurable for you. Some people have a hard time doing that.

Juli: Yes.

Ron: But that’s a good exercise on the way to bring in your body along into a sexual experience.

Juli: Right, right. I know some women, their husbands will ask them what feels good and they’ll be like, “I don’t know.” There’s a real journey there.

But going back to your question, anytime that it becomes a comparison, then immediately you’re planting insecurities in your spouse’s mind. You’re making it again about the experience instead of about the journey between you and your new spouse.

Ron: Let’s role play insecurity and maybe go a step further. Your suggestion was say, “This is what I would like. This is what I would enjoy.”

What if your spouse comes back at that point and says, “Why? Is that the way you used to have sex? Is that the way he always did it or she always did it?”

Their insecurity is pushing through even though you were honest and just vulnerable but their insecurity’s now coming back. What do you do then?

Juli: Yes, yes, I wouldn’t answer the question right out of the gate. I’m a psychologist so I’m trained to answer question with a question—

Ron: Don’t you love that?!

Juli: —or an observation. I might just say, “Wow, that statement seemed to really trigger something in you,” or, “Why would you ask that? I’m just curious.”

Bring to light that, yes, now we’ve got another person in our bedroom that we don’t want in our bedroom so let’s get him or her out by addressing it. Again, I’m trained that way, so are you.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: That comes a little more naturally.

Ron: I know. [Laughter] But sometimes I've had my wife, when she was really furious at me, doing all that kind of stuff and I was doing it inappropriately. I need to own that. I was way too bossy at that point in my life.

She actually wrote out a check and said, "Here." As if to say, "Stop being the counselor." I absolutely needed to stop doing that and just come back to being a real person.

Juli: Right.

Ron: I think your point is really made that if you feel like there's something underneath that, go ahead and say, "Yes, what is that?" Calmly, "What is that? And can we maybe look at it together?"

Juli: Yes, and even rationally just to say, "You and I have both had past experiences. It's not about these relationships but maybe it's about some of what we've learned as we've matured over time. I want to bring the best into this relationship. We have the advantage of having more experience and having learned there's a lot of disadvantages of where we are in life but that's a great advantage. Let's enjoy that."

That's even another reframe.

Ron: Here's another real comparison. One of the breaks on female desire for sex and then interest and arousal within a sexual encounter is her concerns about her own body, comparing body types. What if a woman finds herself wrapped up in that in her head and worried that somehow she's not as pretty or attractive to her husband as his former spouse was.

Juli: Yes, that's a real issue for a lot of women. I think even some men would say that's a big hurdle for them with their own body image. Two things with that:

One thing, I'm going to talk to the husband for a minute, you really need to work to affirm your wife in the way she looks because she knows that she's not the most beautiful woman in the world. She knows that as she's aged her body doesn't look like it did when she was 20, although she was probably insecure when she was 20, too.

She knows that you have at your fingertips access to a million naked women that are more beautiful, more sexy than she is so she needs to hear regularly from your lips, "I don't want anybody else but you. You are the most beautiful woman to me."

If she argues with you, “How about this?”, “How about...?”

“It’s not about that. You’re my wife and you’re the only one I want to be with. Look what you do to me.” Just that continual reinforcement.

Then I want to say to the wives, when your husband gives you that gift, don’t argue with him; believe it, receive it. A lot of women will want to hear from their husbands, “You’re so beautiful. You arouse me. You’re so sexy.” But as soon as he says that they want to list all the reasons why that can’t be true.

Then guys get frustrated of having to say it over and over again. I had to learn this as a wife. At some point stop arguing and just say, “Thank you.” Receive it as a gift.

It really is true that the way God has designed our brains, in particularly the male sexual response, the hormones and neurotransmitters that are emitted during and after sex will bond your husband to you in such a way that over time you really do become the most attractive woman in his world.

It’s a miracle. But when your husband says that to you, he’s being truthful. He’s not saying that objectively if I looked at a million women, you’d be the most beautiful but subjectively, “Because of the journey we’ve gone through and the things we’ve experienced and because my love is focused on you, I can’t see anybody else. It’s just you.”

If your husband’s in that place then that’s a gift, thank him, thank God, and just receive it for what it is.

Ron: That’s a good word. I think even if you can’t believe that about yourself you can trust that he’s genuine and sincere in what he’s saying. That may seem like a disconnect for some people.

But I think it’s possible to say, “You know I—there’s something in me, maybe it’s shame or something connected to the past, but there’s something in me that just can’t believe that I’m that beautiful. But I trust that *he* sees me as beautiful. I’m going to lean into that rather than lean into my own self talk.”

Juli: Another piece of this, too, is recognizing that sexy really isn’t about physical appearance.

We think it is, as women. But if you read in the Proverbs, the Proverbs describes a woman who’s very alluring. She’s like a prostitute, she’s tempting a guy. It doesn’t describe anything about her physical appearance. It is her words that say, “Come with me. Let’s have fun. We’re going to lay on a bed of silk and roses. You can have me.”

That's really what pornography does, too. It's not even so much about the way a woman looks physically. It's the fact that she wants him. That she wants to enjoy sex.

Most men would say, "The most sexy thing to me is when my wife is willing to enter into that space. Where she wants me. She's enjoying it. She's using her body for her to enjoy it, for me to enjoy it." One of the things that I heard before that really helped me is that it's not so much what you have, it's what you do with what you have.

Ron: Yes, I was going to say *confidence*.

Juli: Yes.

Ron: Not that you have to become like the prostitute or the woman in the porn whatever, but confidence is a little take away there that it is extremely sexy for both men and women in terms of what they bring. It's a little bit of attitude that says, "Hey, I know I'm valuable and I know I'm valuable to you, so I'm going to bring the best of that to this."

Juli: Yes.

Ron: That is extremely attractive.

Juli: That's really—I love that word *confidence*. It's like the difference between if you give somebody a gift that you're like, "Oh, I need to buy my husband a gift. I went shopping, and I really couldn't find what he wanted but I've got to give him something so I wrap up this." You start apologizing before you even give it to him.

Ron: [Laughter] Yes, good one.

Juli: I don't know if you're going to like it.

Ron: You probably won't.

Juli: That's no fun.

Ron: You'll never use this.

Juli: Right, versus giving him a gift where you're like, "Wow, I found the perfect thing. I know he's going to love this. I can't wait for him to open it."

The question is, as you're approaching sexuality within your marriage, you get to choose which mindset you have, of feeling insecure and apologizing for what you're offering your husband or being excited that this is a way I can bless him and I look forward to doing that because I know that I can bring him joy.

Ron: Juli, let's talk a little bit about adjusting to a new sexual partner after marriage. Sometimes, maybe people have to unlearn something that they learned as it relates to sexuality over the course of time.

We have little rituals about how sex starts and what happens within any sexual encounter, how we communicate about it, how we articulate desire and even specific activities and preferences that we have within a sexual encounter.

Over time you kind of settle into some of those routines in a relationship. Then you have to unlearn that and relearn that. What's that process like, do you think, for couples?

Juli: Yes, I would guess that, Ron, as you're ministering so much to couples that are in blended families that this is true in every aspect of their relationship. You're not going to handle money the same way you did in your past relationship.

Ron: Right.

Juli: You're not going to discipline the same way. You're not even going to cook the same way.

Probably the overarching advice for all these areas is recognizing that, even at the outset of your marriage saying it out loud to each other, "We think we're experienced in this but we're rookies. I've been married before but I've never been married to you before."

Ron: There you go.

Juli: "So let's play like we're rookies."

Ron: Yes.

Juli: "Let's read the premarital books together. Let's have the counseling together. Let's have the conversations about expectations together."

Those conversations can be more interesting because you are bringing expectations from the past and you can talk about what those expectations were. But as you name them, not assume that that's the way it's going to be in this relationship.

Ron: Yes, I think that's really good. The way I've said it in the past is, it comes down to the colors of your relationship. If you're yellow in your first marriage and you marry red, your us-ness is orange. In a second relationship, you're yellow, but you married blue so now your us-ness is green. There's going to be a different hue on a lot of things in how life rolls out.

I hear what you're saying, you got to be able to acknowledge that some things are going to change and that you're going to discover what those are and more communication about what we do and how we do this. We have to work that out.

One of the things I've found with couples is you can't anticipate everything. You stumble on it or you have a conflict which raises your mind, "Oh, oh, I assumed you always wanted to have this sort of touch before we begin to have intercourse." You just had an assumption there you didn't even know you had.

Juli: Yes.

Ron: That's life.

Juli: Yes.

Ron: Life is going to reveal that. Now you go, "Okay, then what is that for you? How does that work for you?"

Juli: I think even as you approach your honeymoon or the first year or so of marriage, if you think back of being 25 years old and being newlywed, there's an excitement, there's a discovery.

Later in life, you might think, "Wow, it's not going to be as much fun because we've done this before." But if you approach it the way that you're suggesting, there is a new discovery, there is a new excitement of, "Show me how to touch you. Show me what brings you pleasure. Let's learn together." Instead of just assuming that we're pros at this. We're going to fall back into patterns that we learned from the past.

But really even asking God to invite a sense of newness and wonder, because this is a new covenant and it's a new celebration.

Ron: When you get deep inside that, I think along with the newness and excitement and "Teach me and let's learn together," there can be this vein of fear and concern and anxiety. "I'm not doing it right. Obviously my partner has an interest in *this* particular sex act and I don't. That's unfamiliar to me."

All of a sudden now you're nervous and we're back into the anxiety piece. It's like, don't you really have to deal with both of those at the same time? I have to talk down my anxiety. I have to ramp up my anticipation, maybe?

Juli: [Laughter] Yes, because one probably kills the other.

Ron: Yes, good point. Good point.

Here's another, I think, unique challenge for blended family couples, parenting. We kind of talked about this when we talked about family integration but just dealing with kids, the stress of that. Sometimes if you don't feel like you're on the same page as it relates to parenting. Again you could just feel the disconnect outside the bedroom which can create the disconnect inside the bedroom.

I think for people, that might not be an obvious connection to their sex life, but it very much can be one of those things that just contributes to not feeling connected.

Juli: Yes, yes, and even to push into it a little further, my guess is that for a lot of people, they feel more connected to their children than they do to their spouse.

Ron: Sometimes kids are safer than a new spouse.

Juli: Yes.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: Yes, that can even play out in the practical realities of physical space. Where do you go at night? "Well, before we got married my daughter would always sleep in bed with me," or "we'd always cuddle together as a family," or "I'm just going to fall asleep watching TV with the kids because that is my routine, that's my safe place. My kids need me more than my spouse needs me right now. Being married to you is good but it feels weird. It's not as familiar and comfortable."

Without putting words to that, that can start to play out in intimacy where we actually begin avoiding intimacy with a spouse because we're finding comfort, even if it's not sexual comfort, we're finding more comfort and intimacy in familiar relationships with our kids.

Ron: This is reminding me of a story I tell in *The Smart Stepfamily* book about a couple that I worked with where she had had that sort of closeness with her kids. They frequently, in the middle of the night, came into Mom's house when she was a single parent and jumped in bed if they had a bad dream or something or often just for comfort.

Now she's married and now she's closing the bedroom door. That makes a statement about sexuality even to growing kids who don't fully understand that but they know something's going on there. She had this rather precocious little girl who kept coming to the door to see if she could hear them having sex.

They became aware of that and (a) they didn't have a lock on the door and one night she finally pushed through the door and sure enough they were having sex. Now they are completely embarrassed and ashamed. That's unwinding and systematically this nine year old ended up controlling their sex life, right?

Juli: Yes.

Ron: There's so many externals there, they've got to become in charge of. It is a redefinition of the mom's relationship with her daughter. She is setting some new boundaries. She has to do that if she's prioritizing their sex life.

Juli: Yes, absolutely. Then even to play into it more, you think about the fact that, if your mom and dad—you're a kid, you're a teenager—your mom and dad are having sex, you might be grossed out by that.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: But in some ways that's even a comfort, Mom and Dad are still in love. They provide security to watch them go on a date, to watch them kiss each other, be affectionate. You might be like, "Ew, get a room!" like that kind of thing.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: But that's a good thing to you because it provides a sense of security. Now if that is not your natural dad or natural mom, to think about your mom and your stepdad having sex now becomes not just "Ew!" But it becomes in some ways, a representation of a threat.

To see you kiss is not heartwarming always. Again it elicits the grief of, "I'm not with my mom and dad together. I wish they would get together. This person is a threat to me."

Your sex life actually becomes an underlying threat to your stepchildren which means that, at some level without them knowing it, they're going to want to sabotage that. You've got that dynamic that, again, isn't necessarily there if a Mom and Dad are married and have their own children within the home.

Ron: This sparks another parenting thought. That's, what if somebody's listening to us right now and they go, "Wow, I never really took charge spiritually of our sex life or my personal sex life. Married once, slept with a bunch of people during my single parent years. My kids kind of became aware, somebody spent the night and stayed over. Now my kids are growing up and they're in their adolescent years. They're starting to date and I want to teach them healthy sexuality but I didn't really model that well for them."

Juli: Yes.

Ron: What do I do with my sexual past as it relates to helping my kids think about their sexual future?

Juli: Really good point. This is not just a question for those that would be in a remarriage situation.

Ron: Right.

Juli: I think all of us as parents ask this question at some level. There is a difference between saying, "I want my kids to do things differently than I did," and being convicted to a point where you're repenting and changing *your* behavior.

I think kids sniff out if it's like, "Well, I've had my fun, I made my mistakes and that's really not the way you should do it. You should do it this way. Do it God's way," which feels empty.

It feels almost hypocritical. "You're saying do what I say not what I do." Versus when a parent has gone through their own process of, again, awareness and repentance and saying, "I don't want to be that person anymore," asking God to redeem and bring healing.

When a parent then from that place communicates the brokenness that they've experienced because of the choices they've made and their resolution now to honor God now with this area of their life, it has a different weight in the message.

I think depending on your kid's age and their ability to hear things, with discretion you need to share some of the things that God has taught you and some of the painful consequences of choices you've made related to your sexuality. Because otherwise it does feel like, "Hey, do what the Bible says," wink, wink, "but I'm going to keep doing what I want." That's not an effective message.

Ron: Yes, that's so good. It occurs to me as we talked, there are many people listening to this going, "We have some of those challenges but we're finding our way through and this sexual life that we have as a couple is God's second chance on life together. This has been a huge blessing for us."

It seems to me age helps us mature outside the bedroom and inside the bedroom. We often can bring our best selves. I've talked with so many couples in blended family situations, remarriages that are going, "I'm so glad I'm not an immature 25-year-old trying to navigate sexuality anymore. I know who I am. I know what I enjoy. I can bring myself and my confidence to the equation and we are really reaping the benefits."

Juli: Yes, that's awesome. That's where we all want to be. Again, whether it's in a remarriage situation or a marriage that you've been in a long time where you can look back and say, "These are the things I've learned. These are the ways that I've matured. Here's what God has taught me. I'm able to offer far more than I was able to offer when I was younger and had more energy."

Ron: Sexual prime has nothing to do with age or bodily function. It has to do with your heart and finding oneness. That with age, I think, gets better and better and better.

Juli: Yes.

Ron: Resting into that, that's the challenge maybe.

Juli: It gets better if you're willing to do the work we've talked about. We've thrown some gauntlets out for you in terms of things, conversations you need to have, maybe dragons you need to confront and things you need to repent of.

The other side of that hard work is what you're talking about, maturing, security, confidence, a sense of being able to enjoy this is a blessing from God instead of it being something that always represents conflict or fear.

Ron: We started our conversation talking about the spiritual element of sexuality, the sacrament, the place and what God intended for it. How do we maintain our sense of awe and wonder for that?

Well, you've been listening to my conversation with Dr. Juli Slattery. I'm Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*.

You'll hear Juli's response to that question in just a minute. Before that while you're giving us a quick rating on your smartphone right now or perhaps a positive review, let me just remind you that the show notes has some bonus material, articles and broadcasts, that share more about healthy sexuality, including a couple of blog posts from Juli herself. And an article I wrote called "Enhancing Sexual Intimacy." Be sure to check out the show notes for that.

You know, our conversation made me think of something I share in my book, *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, which I wrote with Dr. David Olsen. Be careful not to have a rigid recipe approach for excitement or sexual play.

Men, in particular, need to take this to heart. Sometimes we get into the rut of believing that there is a recipe, we know our wife's combination, what gets her in the mood, what helps her to feel aroused or experience a high degree of pleasure. We're looking for that combination and once we think we find it, then we go back to the recipe over and over and over again.

Here's the thing you've got to keep in mind, and this is true for men and for women, the recipe creates demand. Because implicit in this recipe approach is that the other person will go along with the pathway that you have predetermined for how your sexual experience is going to go. That creates demand and demand turns down sexual energy and arousal and responsiveness. What's helpful today may not be helpful tomorrow.

Instead just focus on making love to the person. Pursue the pleasure of the moment not some predetermined path to orgasm or whatever you have in mind. What you'll find is that you're more in tune with the person, which is, by the way, something that's very, very sexy and adds to the relationship, being more in tune with them rather than trying to work some agenda. That's what moves you toward oneness.

There's more on that thought in our book, *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, which is, by the way, a great DIY study for couples and has a free small group discussion guide to go along with it for small groups if you're a part of one at your local church. Again, the show notes will tell you how to get that resource.

Speaking of show notes, if you'd like more information about Dr. Slattery, you'll find it there as well. You can always check it out on the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast page at FamilyLife.com/podcast.

Your feedback means a lot to me. I appreciate it when you take a minute to post something about this podcast or FamilyLife Blended. One person wrote this, "There is no one better than Ron when it comes to helping couples navigate the troubling waters of a blended family."

By the way, I appreciate that. That encourages me. "His *Smart Stepfamily* line of books," they go on to say, "and videos are the gold standard for stepfamily resources and materials. We saved our marriage and countless others with these tools. We love the podcast as they add even more material to help us and others continue to grow in Christ and in love for each other."

By the way, I love the attitude implicit in that of helping others. You may not feel like your life is in a great place but let me tell you, you always have an opportunity to share an encouraging word or point somebody to a resource. Your marriage can be on mission even if you don't necessarily feel qualified to be on mission.

That's the way God works. He uses us in many ways so pass it on to somebody else and watch and see what happens.

If you haven't subscribed yet to this podcast, you can do so on Apple Podcast, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. Just search *FamilyLife Blended* with Ron Deal. If you like what you hear, again, maybe you'll help us spread the word, post something on social media, tell a friend, point somebody to the resource. We'd really appreciate that and I think it will make a difference for them.

Now here's Juli's response to that question:

We started our conversation talking about the spiritual element of sexuality. How do we maintain our sense of awe and wonder for that?

Juli: Yes, I think you invite God into your sex life, [Laughter] which sounds--

Ron: —that sounds weird sometimes.

Juli: It does. It does. But when I say that there's a couple of different ways, I mean that. One is praying about sex. Praying about your sex life. But another one is continuing to press into getting His perspective on sexuality because so much of our learning about sex has come from unhealthy sources.

The research shows that if you're under the age of 35, there's a good chance you learned about sex through pornography. If you're older than that, you've been impacted by pornography. You've been impacted by all the chick flicks you've seen, by *Cosmopolitan*, by the music, consistent bombardment of, "This is what it means to be sexy. This is what sex should be."

To get the truth, you have to be intentional about just transforming your mind. We talk about that in every area of faith but why don't we talk about that in sexuality where my mind needs to be transformed to get God's perspective of this. I think that's a big part of it is being intentional about asking God to continually reclaim this area of your heart in your life.

Ron: It seems to me if erotic novels and pornography has been your teacher about sexuality, all you have learned is about the counterfeit. You don't even realize that that's what you've been taught.

You've been taught to think physical. You've been taught to think performance. You've been taught to think this or that equals good sex. You don't really don't know anything about oneness. You don't know anything about yourself and how you bring yourself to the sexual experience.

Maybe the challenge here to pursue awe and wonder is to go, "I need to relearn everything."

Juli: Yes. [Laughter] Hey, I did. I don't know about you.

Ron: Yes.

Juli: I had to go through a time, probably about ten years ago, of relearning everything. I wrote a book recently called *Rethinking Sexuality* because even a lot of what we learn in the church isn't Biblical. It's not healthy.

In order to grasp truth we have to begin almost tearing down what we've learned that's not true and confronting it and then rebuilding from a healthy perspective.

Ron: To the listener, today's an opportunity. You're learning some things. Don't let this be the end of it. Maybe use this as a catalyst to conversation because that verbal intercourse will precede better sexual intercourse and dialog with your spouse. Listen together and see where this leads you. Start the journey of relearning what sex is really all about with awe and wonder.

Juli, thanks so much for being with me.

Juli: It's been great. Thanks for having me.

Ron: Next time we'll hear from many of our recent podcast guests and what they've learned about navigating Mother's Day and Father's Day.

Guest 1: For my amazing stepkids, Mother's Day is very hard for them.

Guest 2: There's been a Stepmother's Day one week after Mother's Day since 2000, and I only learned that this year. I feel terrible.

Ron: Blended families coping with Mother's Day and Father's Day, next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal. Thanks for listening. Thanks to our FamilyLife Legacy Partners for making this podcast possible. 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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