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Episode 31: Mother's & Father's Day in Blended Families

Guests: Ron Deal & Various Guests

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Jennifer: My mom married someone later in life so my “stepfather” was never really a father figure to me. I found myself going to the card store and looking at all these Father's Day cards and not being able to relate to any of them.

Many of them are, “Thanks for all that you've taught me growing up,” or, “Thanks for the way you've always cared for me.” I'm like “This man is a stranger to me, really. I mean I've only met him a handful of times and it's the first Father's Day. What am I going to say?”

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.

Well, it's just around the corner. Friend and author Laura Petherbridge says Mother's Day is one of the worst days of the year for stepmoms. Likewise, Father's Day is challenging for many stepdads. But why? What's going on and what can you do about it? That's the subject of this edition of *FamilyLife Blended*.

We've got a panel of parents willing to share their feelings and their thoughts about this so stay tuned.

If you listen to this podcast, then you know that we just wrapped our annual livestream event *Blended and Blessed*. That entire event is available online through our all-access digital pass. The book that the event was based on, *Building Love Together in Blended Families*, is available wherever books are sold. Just go to the show notes and you can learn how to get ahold of both of those resources.

If you haven't subscribed to this podcast, you may not realize that we have dozens of podcasts on a variety of topics. They're all available for you. Let me encourage you to browse through those topics and subscribe so you don't miss any of our future podcasts.

You know for stepparents, biological parents, and children, Mother's Day and Father's Day seem to have tons of swirling emotions. How do you manage this so the day doesn't work against you?

Over the last few months I've been asking all of my podcast guests to share their observations and experiences about Mother's Day and Father's Day. We also asked what lessons have they learned along the way? Our panel is now going to listen and react to those observations.

But before we jump in, since not all blended family dynamics are the same and our panel members have different experiences from one another, I asked them to share a little about their family.

Team, thanks for being here today. Before we jump in and start listening to some of the comments made by my podcast guests over the last few months, I think it would be helpful to our listeners if they know a little bit about you, just kind of a quick sketch of your family. Let me start to my left over here. Shannon, why don't you tell us a little about you?

Shannon: Hi. I'm Shannon Simmons. I have been married to Roosevelt for almost 20 years. We are first-marriage blended family. We have five children ranging from the ages of 21 to 12. I am a biological mom and stepmom, too.

Ron: And you grew up with a stepmom.

Shannon: Yes, I have two stepmoms. I had a stepdad. But yes, two stepmoms that I'm definitely in relationship with still and my biological mother. My father passed away in '97 so I'm a stepkid and a stepmom.

Ron: Good, glad to have you. Jennifer?

Jennifer: Well I—my name is Jennifer Walker. My husband and I have been married for 17 years. My dad passed away when I was 19. I had a younger brother and a younger sister, so we were three teenagers and my mom became a widow. She was a widow for 15 years. We all grew up and then she found someone and got married. I became an adult stepchild not that long ago, about five years ago.

Ron: Alright, good. Now you and your husband work in ministry, do some marriage ministry?

Jennifer: Yes, we do. Yes, we started seeing in our local church that there were so many blended families that just needed some help and encouragement, especially since I am new into a stepfamily situation myself. We just said, "Well, let's step into that." Nathan and I started leading *Smart Stepfamily* actually. We've done it a couple of times. It's on the calendar to do again this year. People have been very encouraged and helped through that.

Ron: Great, great. Thanks for being here. Brian?

Brian: I'm Brian. My wife, Libby, and I have been married almost nine years. I didn't have natural children but when I got married I suddenly had twin 20-year-old stepsons, then a ten year old, which is still kind of a little boy. That was really kind of an adventure. We had a very good time. My wife and I are getting involved in blended ministry—blended family ministry in church now coming up.

Ron: Alright, good. Great to have you. Thanks. And Tanisha?

Tanisha: Yes, I'm Tanisha Johnson. I have four girls, two biological and two stepkids. I've been divorced for five years. I was married for five years but I've still got the stepkids.

Ron: You've still got them. They're still involved in your life?

Tanisha: Oh, yes.

Ron: Yes.

Tanisha: Very much so.

Ron: And very important, as I recall from another conversation we've had, they very much think of you as Mom.

Tanisha: Oh yes.

Ron: Yes.

Tanisha: Definitely.

Ron: Let's just jump in. Our first clip is going to be from Kathy Lipp who is an author and a speaker. She appeared on podcast number 22, "The Clutter-Free Home and the Clutter-Free Family." Let's hear what she had to say.

Kathy: The most important thing I learned about Mother's Day as a stepmother is the best gift I can give my stepkids is to bless them in honoring their mom.

"Do I need to take you to go shopping?" I need to be the one to remind them to go get the card or the flowers or something like that because then I can have a Mother's Day that's at peace.

We can celebrate on another day. It doesn't have to be on Mother's Day. I can rest in the knowledge that I have done the right thing on behalf of my stepkids, my husband, and my husband's ex-wife because I believe God has called us to serve those that sometimes don't always make our lives super easy. But that's what being a Christian's all about.

Ron: Okay, that's interesting to me. What are your reactions to that? Her focus is not so much on *her* on Mother's Day but it's on *her* stepkids.

Shannon: I definitely agree with that. I tried to do that over the years as a stepmom. Earlier I would think that, "Oh, let's see if they'll give me anything." But because I know my own children don't do that well, I don't expect [Laughter] my stepchildren to do that. Early when I was maybe two, three years in, I was probably thinking, "Oh, will they get me anything?" Then you deal with the disappointment.

But as I've grown and learned a little bit more, I do want to give them permission to not feel any guilt, not feel any tension. "This day is about your mom. You got a card? Do I need to give you some money?"

I've always had this dream to go with my stepchildren to go shopping for their mom. Never had the opportunity to do that but I do bring it up, "Hey, have you thought about this?"

Like my stepson, his mom's birthday is coming up so before he goes to college I want to, "Hey, what are you getting your mom for her birthday?" I love the idea of what she said because it takes that off of you where you know, "Hey, this is not about me and if anything comes of that that's just a plus."

Tanisha: I think with experience that that type of mindset comes, Shannon. I will say that's pretty tough for moms early on or stepmoms early on, especially if they have the kid with them full-time, because then you feel like you're entitled to those gifts because you're serving in that mom role.

Shannon: Right.

Tanisha: I think with experience and then with acknowledging that your own kids are going to forget about you.

Shannon: Right.

Tanisha: Yes, I've been in both spots.

Ron: I think that's a good perspective. Both of you mentioned your own kids don't always acknowledge you well on Mother's Day.

Shannon: Right.

Ron: That's really helpful for our listener, a stepdad or stepmom, who doesn't have any biological children of their own and they just don't quite have that perspective. That's a

good little reminder. Kids just in general are not real great about Mother's Day and Father's Day.

But I want to press in a little bit more around this. I can hear somebody objecting going, "Okay, yes, that's so sweet to be child focused on Mother's Day but I am doing a lot for them. Every other day of the year is about them. Why can't this day be about me?"

Shannon: This is where learning more about stepfamily ministry comes in. There is a day for stepmoms a week after Mother's Day. That following Sunday is Stepmother's Day. A lot of people don't know that.

Brian: Yes.

Shannon: But the person who has called you to be that, the person who made you the step, that's the person who should acknowledge your service, your sacrifice, so your spouse.

Teach your spouse, "You know this is what I need. I know I can't demand and control this whole day, but just know that on this particular day I'm a little sensitive. If you could do something that will help us maybe celebrate some of the victories in our stepfamily or anything, but I need this time just to know that I'm making a difference and you see it."

Ron: You're getting it from somebody.

Shannon: Yes.

Tanisha: Yes.

Brian: Oh, yes.

Ron: Somebody somewhere is acknowledging you.

Shannon: Right.

Ron: Husbands on Mother's Day; wives on Father's day.

Shannon: Right.

Ron: That's a big role you can play that helps take some of the pressure off?

Shannon: Correct.

Ron: Yes, but at the end of the day you've got to remind yourself this really can't 100 percent be about me. It really is a change of focus to say, "What do the kids need from me? They need me to encourage them." I think Kathy's language was bless them—

Shannon: Yes.

Tanisha: Yes.

Ron: —to honor their mother.

Shannon: Right.

Ron: Wow, I thought that was really good.

Tanisha: Take them off the hook.

Brian: Yes.

Shannon: Because if they think they're on the hook to do something and then it doesn't get done, then they just may avoid or won't even acknowledge it.

Tanisha: That helps you build your relationship with their mom, too. She knows that you had to influence that.

Shannon: Right.

Ron: Really, you think she does?

Shannon: Not all the time.

Tanisha: It depends on the age of the child.

Shannon: Right, it does.

Tanisha: Not for older kids, but younger ones.

Shannon: Yes, yes.

Ron: Good point.

Brian: Oh, yes.

Ron: They responded in a way that was more mature than their age. They had to have somebody helping them to get there and that hopefully —get some credit for that or at least some acknowledgment from the other household.

Tanisha: But don't expect it.

Shannon: No, don't expect it.

Brian: Don't expect anything.

Tanisha: Exactly.

Brian: Keep your expectations low.

Tanisha: Very low. [Laughter]

Brian: Be thankful for anything you get.

Ron: Brian, that sounds like the voice of experience.

Brian: Well, I'm thankful I married a really thoughtful woman. Libby, actually most of my Father's Day cards are from her and gifts, too. I like little gifts. I'm just like that. If a little child at church gives me a colored page or something, I'll put that on the refrigerator. It's a big deal to me.

But yes, most of the time it's just been Libby. It'll be like, "I know it's not easy but you're doing a great job. Thank you." It's always my role because kids are just not necessarily thoughtful. All kids need to be taught, "Hey, let's go get Mommy something."

But it's another whole level, I think, when I'm supposed to go to Walmart and pick out a card with the younger one for his dad. I better not even care if it's anything about me. It's not supposed to be.

Tanisha: Right.

Ron: That's a good reminder. Alright, so let's listen to our second clip. This one comes from Ryan Guinee. I interviewed him and David Bowden on episode 28 called "Growing Up in a Blender."

Ryan: As a kid growing up in a blended family, I can see how this would be a sore spot for stepparents. 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.

I especially struggle with this being a Christian. We're called to honor our parents but what does that mean about stepparents? I've never really sorted that out. What if you don't find them worthy of honor or love or affection or obedience?

Ultimately, I've come to respect more what my stepmother's done for my dad rather than anything that she's done for me. I hope there's a more mature view that I've had in the past than that but I can't say that I've had that view.

I don't know exactly how to show that appreciation on a day like Mother's Day, other than to say that she's special. Based on that, a misstep for anyone trying to figure out Mother's Day or Father's Day could just to be exclude them altogether.

I've realized I'm accustomed to honoring all mom's on that day anyway. My mom, now my wife, other moms around me, friends, coworkers. It really is a day, whether they're related to you or not, you esteem the role of mother. I could've been doing that this whole time.

Even if the relationship is sore or I don't necessarily respect her influence in my life, I could still show you value and love and appreciation because of what she does for *her* kids and who she is to my dad.

Ron: I think I heard some angst in those comments, some confusion, like he's still trying to figure it out.

Jennifer: I can really relate to his comments. My mom married someone later in life so my "stepfather" was never really a father figure to me. I found myself going to the card store and looking at all these Father's Day cards and not being able to relate to any of them.

So many of them are, "Thanks for all that you've taught me growing up," or "Thanks for the way you've always cared for me." I'm like "This man is a stranger to me, really. I mean I've only met him a handful of times and it's the first Father's Day. What am I going to say?"

I can relate to what he had said about—I tried to get a simple card that just says, "Happy Father's Day" and then I just write in it, "Thank you so much for making my mom so happy and thank you for the role that you're playing in her life that she can enjoy her later years in life being married again." I think just encouraging his role even though he's not the stepfather, the father role in my life.

Ron: That sounds like you found a happy medium for you. Something genuine that you can articulate and say to him on Father's Day. At the same time, I'm wondering if you feel a little guilty about it, like it's not enough or something to just say, "Thank you for loving my mom."

Jennifer: Well, not really. [Laughter]

Ron: It really is genuine.

Jennifer: It really is. I feel like maybe the Father's Day cards will change over time but I live a state away. I only see my mom's husband about three times a year. They've been married for five years.

I mean it's gotten a little bit better each time I go and visit but the first couple of years he was still really a stranger to me. I felt like just acknowledging, "Hey, Happy Father's Day." I'm at least acknowledging your position in our family. I felt like that was sufficient at the time, I guess.

Ron: I've got to just say—we've talked about this on this podcast before but in case you've not heard it—what Jennifer is talking about is very common among what's called adult stepchildren.

When you acquire a stepparent later in your life, you're an adult, oftentimes people don't identify them as a parent figure at all. It's Mom's husband as your language has shown. That's a very common thing, very normal. You're working out your relationship with them as you're able. It is what it is.

But I want to reflect that back to the rest of the panel and ask you this, does that perspective, hearing her, does that help you understand your stepchildren and some of the ways they've responded to you?

Brian: Oh, definitely, yes. I think time and time together is a big part of what happens. The older guys were 20. They were out of the house. I saw them less often. One of them would tell his mom, "It's just weird, Mom. It's weird, you know." I get that. Somebody new in the house. Do I walk around in my underwear like normal? [Laughter] It's somebody new.

But then the younger one was with me more and I spent more time with him. Time is everything. We had more of a family relationship with the younger one. He's ten years younger. That's kind of normal I think.

Ron: What would you say to a listener who's saying, "What do I do with that? How do I adjust my expectations? What am I supposed to do as a stepparent who's in that place trying to navigate this terrain with this kid?"

Brian: I think, keep the expectations low. Just be thankful for any little thing. I remember the first time one of them referred to me as his stepfather. That was something. I liked that. If they send you a card—I'm sentimental but I keep everything—if they send me a card, "I love you."—if the younger one comes to visit—He's now 19—if he hugs me and says, "I love you," that's a big deal. I remember that. I might even write it down. [Laughter]

Ron: See it for what it is and embrace it.

Brian: Yes, it's a big deal.

Ron: Alright, good.

Tanisha: I think time spent with kids in general, right, but I mean especially with stepkids that's what created such a strong bond between me and my stepdaughters. We spent so much time together, just us without their dad around. They even dropped "step." They call me "Mom" or "Momma Tanisha." I think a big part of that is how much time I invested in them.

Ron: On any given year, it might not be great but you then have another year before the next Mother's Day or Father's Day to try to continue to invest time and figure that out.

What about for you, Jennifer? As an adult, you've got life and kids and family and work and stuff and so does your mom. They're a state away. It's not convenient. I guess you can take little steps?

Jennifer: Yes. Well, I try when I am in town to visit. Like my mom's pretty good about trying to make sure that she has time alone with me which is—I value that. I really appreciate that.

But we also try to make sure that during those visits there's times that we can all spend together so I *can* get to know her husband better. We try to do special activities together or just even hanging out at the house and spending time together. I try to take those opportunities to just get to know him a little bit better.

I will say it has been five years. I can say that our relationship is better than it was initially. There is that trend of getting closer. I anticipate that that will continue to happen but it just takes time. Like I said, I may only see him like three times a year so it's hard to just form those instant bonds in just such a short time, especially when they're very spaced apart, too.

Ron: Okay, so let me get you to react to one more thing Ryan said. He said in two different statements, he said, "Kids sometimes just don't know how to honor their stepparent. They're just not sure what that looks like or what to do." He also said, "It's a mistake for kids to exclude the stepparent."

Okay, if you don't know how to honor sometimes you might inadvertently exclude. What do you think we should do to help children know how to honor?

Shannon: I think you should walk the example. For instance, as a kid growing up, I remember my mom wanting me to call my stepdad—when she was married—she's divorced now—but when she was married she wanted me to call my stepdad "Dad" or "Daddy." I just couldn't do that. I don't think I ever said his name. I always made sure that I was in eyeshot of him so he could know I was talking to him.

Brian: Oh, yes.

Shannon: I never addressed him as anything. I don't think I called him by his first name but I just felt it was dishonoring to call another man *Daddy*, so what would I call him? We didn't have your books at the time. We didn't know that we could have a conversation, "Hey, what do you want to call me?"

Brian: Oh, yes.

Shannon: We never had that conversation. Her trying to make me call him *Daddy*, to me in my heart, showed dishonor to my biological father. Giving them the example that you can honor your biological parent and you can honor your stepparent, but find a way where it doesn't make you feel like you're giving one more than the other. That's what I felt like I would've been doing.

Helping a child know, "Oh, I only have \$20. This is all I can use to buy my biological parent something."

If the stepparent can say, "Hey, don't worry about me. Let's get your mom something." Maybe that gives that child freedom to say, "You know what? She wants me to love my mom and it's okay. Maybe I could make her a card."

All: Right.

Ron: You can figure it out at that point.

Shannon: Yes.

Ron: The permission is—

Shannon: —permission to love.

Brian: Oh, yes.

Ron: Very important. Alright, let's listen to another clip. This comes from recording artist, Sandi Patty, episode number 27. I interviewed she and her husband Don about their life journey. That episode was called "Beyond Broken." Let's hear what she had to say.

Sandi: For my *amazing* step kids, Mother's Day is very hard for them because their mother passed away of cancer several years ago. I have learned over the years to just follow their lead. I mean that's the best advice I can give anybody. They do not owe me—and I will say they always call me on Mother's Day—they always send a card—but I try not to put that expectation on them because it is so raw and fresh even after ten plus years.

I know my relationship with each of them. I don't need a card on a certain day for that. I really just take my lead from them and then am appreciative if I get a call. If I don't, I don't take that personally either because it is a wrestle. It's a wrestle of a day for them.

Ron: Sandi's aware that her stepchildren's mother passed away so Mother's Day brings sadness. Jennifer, that's your situation.

Jennifer: Oh, yes. I can totally relate with that. In fact, it really surprised me, my mom didn't get remarried until 15 years after my dad had passed away. In those 15 years we got really used to it just being my mom and my brother and sister and I. I remember that summer that they met and they were planning to get married that I remember grieving my dad all over again. [Crying] Sorry.

Ron: No, it's okay.

Jennifer: Because to me this person wouldn't be in our family if my dad was still alive. That really surprised me. It took me by surprise that I just grieved my dad all over again. Father's Day became hard for another reason.

Ron: It's such a mixed bag, isn't it? To move toward him and try to build a friendly relationship is to somehow embrace your father's passing, which you don't really want to do. I mean, that's a part of grief. We want to hold on. We don't want to move beyond. You get torn up in there.

Jennifer: I will honestly say, too, I am so thankful that Gary, my mom's husband, he understands the situation. I feel like he does everything to try to honor our dad. He told my mom, "If you want to display pictures of him in the home, I am totally okay with that." He has said, "If you want to tell me stories about your dad, I would love to hear them."

I feel like he has handled it very well, to also just know from being a dad that this is a special relationship that we're missing with our dad.

Ron: I'm sure that gives you permission, as Shannon was saying a little while ago, gives you permission to continue to love your dad—

Jennifer: Yes, absolutely.

Ron: —and hold him in esteem and be close to him in that way and that you're not replacing by making space in your heart for your stepdad.

Jennifer: Right. He has said that on numerous occasions, "I am not here to replace your dad. I just love your mom."

Brian: That's awesome.

Ron: Yes, it is.

Shannon and Tanisha: That's good.

Ron: I just, even as I reflect to the listener what we're hearing from Jennifer, I appreciate your genuineness in sharing about that. I mean, listen, it's *still* hard. He's handling it really well and giving you permission and it's *still* hard for you because it's your dad.

Jennifer: Yes.

Ron: Yes. I guess we could turn it over and say, what if...? What if your stepdad was possessive and said, "No pictures and no I don't want to hear any stories about that man." What would that do? Can you imagine?

Jennifer: I can't even imagine. It would be a lot. I mean it's already hard. This is already a hard position to be in. I think that that would make us—it would make me a lot more uncomfortable around him. I think it would make me feel like I couldn't pursue this real transparent relationship with him if he's not allowing me to experience these feelings and emotions and express them.

Shannon: I think it would also tempt you to go to your mom and ask her to choose or make your husband do this. Like, this is our home. If they're still living in your home of origin, they are?

Jennifer: No, they're not.

Shannon: No? Okay. But if that were the case, "This is the home I grew up in and you're telling me I can't put up a picture."

I actually had this conversation with my stepmom. After my brother passed away, my sister brought out some pictures of the first family, so my brother, my sister, my stepmom and my dad, and brought that out. My brother's been passed away almost three years. A family member of my stepmom told her, "This is disrespectful to your husband to have this picture up."

There's this whole conversation. She was asking, "Is this wrong?" She asked me, her stepdaughter.

I said, "Well, what does your husband say?"

She said, "He's fine with it. He knows where he is in my life. He knows he's my priority. This is for my children." My sister lives with them. This is just a reminder of their family. It's the memory that she wants to continue to honor or whatever. It's okay with him.

She had some issues with it. She asked me about it. I said, “If your husband’s giving you permission to do it, I think it’s okay.”

Jennifer: Back to your question again, I really think that if my stepdad had responded that way to me, I feel like walls would have been built totally, that the relationship would just be stagnant—

Shannon: Right.

Jennifer: —because I feel like that would create that tension and that wall between us.

Ron: I’m hearing from both of you, the amount of time doesn’t really matter, you still have loyalties and love for those original relationships. Even, Shannon, in your situation with the passage of time, people still wonder, “Is this disloyal at this point in time?”

It takes a conversation.

Shannon: Yes.

Ron: Having the conversation is where you find the place where you can both, where you can meet as stepparent, stepchild, whatever the case may be. But you have to have the courage to enter that conversation. Say, “Here’s my heart for you. Here’s my permission for you. How do you feel about that? Let’s try to negotiate how we’re going to do life together.”

Shannon: Right.

Ron: That is where you get past the awkward, the strange, the bizarre, and find your way through. It’s just not always easy to do.

By the way, I heard another theme in a couple of the comments, in that going back to what Sandi said. She knows her relationship with her stepchildren so she doesn’t put too much stock in what happens on *that* day because she knows the relationship.

Shannon when you were talking about your stepdad that he said the same thing. “I know where I belong,” in talking to his wife, “I know where I belong in your heart, so for you to have a picture of your former husband is okay with me.”

Let’s unpack that for a minute. How do you hold onto what you know you have? What if it’s not that strong, but it’s something? How do you set and be at peace with what you have even when your heart longs for more?

Tanisha: I think for me how I hold onto what I have instead of focusing on what I want, I guess, from them. I cling on to a lot of memories and really through a lot of prayer and just—I feel like I have to die to myself so much when it comes to those kids. I just do. I

have to put my own wants and needs—we already do that as moms, but it's even more so with the stepkids.

Ron: Amen to that.

Brian: Yes.

Ron: Alright team, for our next little clip, it's a little bit different direction. Darryl Smith, this is from podcast episode 24, "Blending despite Betrayal."

Darryl: I would say I have learned that it's hard. Do you call the mothers? Do you text them and tell them, "Happy Mother's Day?" If you do it is that betraying Gwen? Again, I just don't open the box. I just don't do it.

Ron: Give you a little context: his terminology there "I don't open the box." In that episode he's talking about the hard things that he has done in his past and how that's created hurt for his wife.

His terminology, he's put those things in a box and he tries to keep it off to the side and not open it unless they really need to open it. What he's saying is on Mother's Day he just feels it's better to not do anything to acknowledge the mothers of his children because that's opening up some pain.

Now that's a very specific situation. But I'm wondering if you guys can relate to something similar to that? Do you find yourself tiptoeing around certain subjects? Is it better to just let it lie? What do you think?

Tanisha: No.

Ron: [Laughter] There was a long pause.

Tanisha: I have so much to say on that subject.

Ron: Go for it. Go for it. Let's hear it.

Tanisha: I want to respond to the clip. I don't understand not acknowledging the mothers at all. I am divorced. I expect to hear from my ex-husband on Mother's Day. I have two of his children that I'm raising.

Ron: You're still partners in raising those children—

Tanisha: We are.

Ron: —one form or another.

Tanisha: We still have to communicate. We still have to make certain decisions. So yes, I want to hear. I want to hear from you.

Ron: At the same time, I imagine you can understand why, for Darryl, that's awkward, puts him in a tough situation with his current wife.

Tanisha: It's awkward, but I was in that situation when I was married and my ex-husband has children from two other women. I would make sure he communicated with them.

Really it was more so for selfish reasons, like, "I don't want drama in my own house. I don't want them looking at me like I think I'm better than them so you need to make sure you reach out to them."

Shannon: Right.

Tanisha: I don't care if I have to pick up your phone and do it myself, via text.

Ron: This is going to happen.

Tanisha: It's going to happen. That was just from me and I just didn't want drama and I wanted the kids to have a good relationship.

Ron: This is a tough subject. Anyone else got another thought?

Brian: I think that's maturity. I think that's just confidence in who you are and the relationship you have with your spouse. You do what's right. I think that's being an adult. It's with parenting, it's with everything. You—if it should be done you try to make yourself do it and whine about it later. [Laughter] I've been there and done that, so, yes.

Shannon: I see it as giving your spouse permission to honor. Because again for Darryl he was saying, "I've caused her so much pain, if I open this box it may cause her even more. I just don't want to deal with it."

Tanisha: Right.

Shannon: Because he's not dealing with the box, you're inadvertently allowing pain to still come to you and your family because that affects how you communicate with those children's mothers. Then that communicates to the children how you may feel about them. Who knows, but yes, you've got to deal with the pain and awkwardness of it.

Ron: Well spoken.

Brian: Yes.

Ron: The next clip is from guest Melody Fabian, episode number 26. In that episode we were talking about growing up in two different homes, for her growing up in a blended family and the values between her two homes were very different. Let's hear what she had to say.

Melody: Growing up in a blended home, I wish when it came to Father's Day it was more of a kind of honor and respect to really honor my biological father first. Because he was the first father entering into the picture. Like, "Hey, it's Father's Day. Make sure you honor your father. Spend time with him and then you'll have time with your other father, your stepfather."

Or really just giving honor to the dad who's been there first and the most you know because my dad was always there. Don't erase the Dad that's always been there just because there's a new one there.

Ron: Don't erase the dad who's there.

Shannon: That was good.

Tanisha: Good.

Ron: Do you think there's something important about timing? She seemed to be keying in on timing, "Honor your biological dad first." This is—part of what she's wishing for is that her biological mother had encouraged that in her. Honor your biological dad first then my new husband, your stepdad. Is timing—does that matter?

Shannon: I don't—it could in your heart in how you see. It depends on the personality. I know for me, like on Mother's Day, I'm going to spend time with my mom, like *significant* time. Since my stepmom and mom live in the same city, I can honor them on the same day. I really can and I try to do that.

The good thing about my stepfamily is that my mom *never* tries to stop me from doing so. She encourages it. She's never shared any jealousies about it. She's never said, "You know, you're going over there a little more than coming over here." Right?

She truly has given me permission to love both of them and have a place in my heart for both of them. I know who my mom is. My momma is Dilse Mae Scott, a strong black woman, I know this. [Laughter]

My stepmom is just as strong. I am the stepmom that I am because of her. Because of how well she did it. I don't necessarily think you have to do it in order. I just think in your heart you just don't want to make one feel worse or better than the other. You want them both to feel valued.

Ron: Mic drop. Next.

Mother's Day and Father's Day gets really complicated when one of the biological parents is missing in action. This next comment comes from Andy Hetchler, episode number 29. He and his wife Heather were my guests. We were talking about how do you do parenting and step parenting when the biological parent in the other home has dropped off the face of the earth?

Andy: We had to get creative in how we wanted to help navigate it. We never fixed it. We never solved it but one of the things we did try and do for our house was to create Daughter's Day. Really to put the attention on all the women in the house and to try and point the thinking in a different direction was one of the things that we tried to do.

Ron: How do you celebrate Mother's Day when the biological mother is nowhere to be found or basically is uninvolved, disengaged? Her relationship is very poor. They tried to switch it around and celebrate "Daughter's Day."

Thoughts?

Tanisha: It's creative.

Brian: It is.

Tanisha: I wish my mom would've had someone to encourage her to be creative. She grew up without her biological mom in the picture so Mother's Day is always hard for her.

But I'm thankful that she does have other close aunts that she was able to spend time with and even a past girlfriend of my grandpa's that she really has a strong connection with. Even now it's hard for her. Mother's Day is hard for her because she never had that strong bond with her own mom.

Ron: You know any day that's special, anytime of the year, when there's somebody missing, there's a sadness in the room. One of the things I've learned in my own life having lost a son is what you just said, Tanisha, is very important.

When other people come into the picture and just love on you a little bit, kind of find their way in, it does not fix it. Andy said that, "We got creative. We didn't solve it but we found a way around the hard." Yes. Sometimes that's just what you're hoping for, right?

Guests: Yes.

Brian: Just be a little sensitive to everybody. If they need to talk about it a little bit just let them talk about it. Just be there. Just listen.

Shannon: Do you think you could've done that Brian, have a son's day? Because I know you're the other home is a little difficult. I think that was a good idea. Is that something you think you could've implemented in your home maybe?

Brian: Maybe. We did do a lot of just kind of creative things. I think traditions are important in families anyway so you come up with some semi-creative ones.

Shannon: Yes.

Brian: I never heard of a stepdad gift at Christmas but I thought—I was so excited to have kids—I didn't have any. Suddenly I have two pretty grown ones and a little one. They got a stepdad gift. It was more of a big deal to me than them but whatever.

Ron: So you labeled it "the stepdad gift"?

Brian: Yes. They know they're going to get a special separate gift just from me that looks like I thought about them during the year. That's all that is.

Shannon: Yes.

Brian: I have a good time with it. They may or may not love it, who knows? [Laughter] Sometimes they do.

Ron: Again, you're building your own tradition with its own meaning.

Brian: A new tradition.

Ron: Your relationship stands on its own. You're just trying to give some sort of marker, something for people to hang onto.

Brian: I try to be the adult for them; always have the right attitude. I pout about it around my wife when the kids are not around. [Laughter]

"I can't believe that happened. I can't believe nobody thought about me. It's my birthday, too." None of that. You don't do that with the kids—

Tanisha: Right.

Brian: —even when they're 29.

Shannon: Right.

Brian: Yes.

Ron: Okay, let's hear the next clip.

Ginger: For our first Mother's Day, the girls' mom was coming to pick them up early so I woke up at five o'clock to make her some homemade cinnamon rolls from the girls, of course. The day before we had helped them make a craft for her. Of course, the bitter emails from her did not stop a few weeks later, but we always tried to practice Romans 12:18 ...inasmuch as it depends on me, live at peace with everyone [paraphrase].

Ron: That was Ginger Oriente from episode 23. We were talking about rebuilding her marriage and reconciling with a child in her family.

What do you think about that? Romans 12:18 "...as far as it depends on you, live at peace..." For her that translated into, "We're going to make a gift and I'm going to help the girls have something to give to their mom."

Shannon: Amen.

Brian: The right thing to do.

Tanisha: Yes, it's the right thing to do. I'll tell you a quick story. It actually happened on Mother's Day morning. My youngest step daughter had been living with us for about four months. She was four years old at the time. My daughter was three so it was a *ton* of work for me.

I didn't know her mom was coming to town to pick her up so I thought, I assumed that I was going to spend Mother's Day with her.

Even though we went out and bought a gift for her mom, I was planning on shipping it because, again, it was a surprise that she was coming to town. She came to town early that morning. She came to the house.

My feelings were hurt. My feelings were hurt. I felt, "Wow, I've spent all this time and invested—just I sacrificed for the last couple months and put everything that I needed to do on the back burner to help raise your kid, and this is the thanks I get."

Although I didn't communicate that, I had to pack her up, make sure the clean clothes were in the bag, and helped comb her hair that morning so they could go to their church service. I went ahead and did the right actions. My heart wasn't there but I knew it'd catch up. [Laughter] But—eventually.

Ron: But you went the extra mile.

Tanisha: I went the extra mile just to show like, "Oh well, yes, I'm being understanding." I wasn't but to me it was always, I was always trying to be the peacekeeper, the peacemaker, make sure my house was at peace. Yes.

Ron: I appreciate your honesty. That was a sacrifice on your part. It was in the effort to keep peace.

Tanisha: It's easier said than done. Again, my heart was *not* there.

Brian: Oh, yes.

Tanisha: My mind was not there. I was saying a bunch of crazy stuff in my head, but...

Ron: I'll just add here, keeping peace at all costs is not helpful. As I've said before, peace at all costs means you will experience all costs.

Shannon: Yes.

Ron: But there are moments where we make very conscious decisions and sacrifices for the sake of peace. That's certainly appropriate as long as it's in balance. Mother's Day and Father's Day seems to be one of those times where you have to make sacrifices. I've heard that over and over from our table discussion. I don't know that there's any way around it.

Let's go ahead and roll our next clip.

Diane: I would like to share a quote about Mother's Day or Father's Day. I think acceptance comes from not having attachments to expectations. So many people are familiar with Michael J. Fox and how he's battled Parkinson's. I love, love, love this quote. I would like to leave this with listeners for Mother's Day or Father's Day:

"My happiness grows in direct proportion to my acceptance and in inverse proportion to my expectations."

I think there's a huge expectation and just a craving to have Mother's Day and Father's Day be celebrated, be recognized as a stepparent on Mother's Day and Father's Day. I think there's a lot of wisdom in perhaps letting that day be in celebration of the biological mom and dad and pick a different day to celebrate the stepparents.

Ron: That was Diane Fromme. I interviewed her. She was my guest on episode number 17, where we talked about grief in the blended family. Wow, inverse relationship between acceptance and expectations. Happiness goes up as I accept what is. My happiness goes down when my expectations are not met. It seems that we've come full circle. We started the podcast talking about expectations and here we're coming back to it again.

Brian: Yes.

Tanisha: I think we're coming back to it because that's what step parenting is really all about, to me, *expectations*. I feel like you set yourself up for failure if they're too high.

Ron: Sets you up for failure. Sets you up for disappointment.

Tanisha: Yes, I think it sets you up for both. Disappointment with your feelings and you want these kids to love you. You want them to acknowledge you. And failure because I already deal with mom guilt. It's a bit heavier when it comes from kids I didn't birth.

Jennifer: I think expectations are very important to look at in this situation. I, for myself personally, I had to let go of the family that I had before. It being my mom, my dad, brother, sister and us being this biological happy family. When my dad passed away, that changed.

I think I had to let go of the fact that I'm not going to have that family ever again. God can heal our hurts. He can heal our pain. He has. He's done a real work in my heart about it. But I had to really let go of the past and let go of that expectation that everything's going to be happy and everybody's going to love the position in their family that they are in.

I had to let go of that and just to be able to embrace the new family, just to say—I know in your books several places, you've said it takes five to seven years to navigate your new position in a stepfamily—I had to embrace that.

I had to say, "Okay, this is going to take some time but this is my new family. This is my new reality in my new family situation. I just need to embrace it and ask God to help me navigate it."

Ron: I'm wondering a couple of things. Was there anything in particular that was a barrier to you letting go of those expectations in terms of embracing the new family and the new identity and what is? I'm also wondering if your siblings moved at a pace differently than yours or had different opinions about the new family and did that create any awkward dynamics?

Jennifer: Well, one obstacle for me personally was my pride. I had become so prideful in having this wonderful family that was looking on the outside and the inside—we had a pretty great family, to be honest.

I even had trouble, even after my dad passed away, trying to introduce my mom to people, "This is my mom and my dad passed away." I wanted to say that so it didn't look like I had this incomplete family. It was awkward to try to figure out how to explain.

If I mention—I was in college when my dad passed away. When I would tell my friends, "I'm going home to see my mom. Well, my dad passed away." I didn't want anyone to think that. That was just a huge pride issue for me.

I had to let go of the fact that, “We are not perfect. Our family is not perfect and I shouldn’t be ashamed to say, ‘Here’s who we are as a family.’”

Ron: That's good.

Tanisha: That’s good stuff right there.

Shannon: I think the grief, too, that you’re dealing with Jennifer for me—my dad passed away when I was in college, as well—when I connect with my stepmom, she gives me memories of my dad that I never had. She gets to tell me about the Dad that I didn’t know growing up. I’m attracted to that. It’s like when I’m connected to her, when I spend time with her and my sister, that we can kind of eat that soup, yes?

Brian: Oh, yes.

Shannon: It’s attractive to me. I just love that my mom is allowing me to do that.

Ron: Yes, you’re talking about eating the soup of grief together and talking and sharing—

Shannon: Right.

Ron: —and entering into that space with one another.

Shannon: Yes, because I’m not letting go of the old. The old is who made me. The old is what made you. It’s not necessarily that you have to let go of that memory. You’ve just got to let go of trying to push that ideal or that picture into what is now.

I still honor it. I can remember it. She’s given me new memories. But I know that’s not what is. My father’s passed away. My dad and mom never married. I will never have that ideal, right? But I can learn from her and relive some of those memories that I never had with him.

Ron: You know one of the things I’ve heard from this table a couple of times is holding onto what you do have is so important compared to constantly being focused on what you don’t have. It’s not all perfect but maybe a slice of it is. Maybe there’s something that you can cherish and feel good about even when there’s other things you’re still working on and long for. Just holding onto that slice.

Tanisha: Amen.

Brian: Look for it. Yes. I had another thought just about grief. Grief pops up in so many ways that when you first get married, if you’re going to have step children, they’re still grieving that their parents aren’t in the home and they see them all the time.

Then their grieving, in our case, they don't just have mom to themselves. There's this other guy. Who is he? What's he like? Is he going to bother us? They have those things to get used to.

But then you just begin to look for good. I don't know, in the thick of it, when we were a new family—we're nine years in—that's not a long time—but in the very first two or three years it got a little thick. We went to a family counselor who just told us, "Time is going to help. It doesn't heal everything, but it does help." Over time they knew what to expect from me and I knew what to expect from them. At Christmas they're going to talk about memories with Dad. That's good and I better be okay with all that.

Yes, so time helps and there's hope.

Ron: You've been listening to a conversation about Mother's Day and Father's Day in blended families. I'm Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*.

At one point, Jennifer made a comment about how in order to accept her new family and move forward with her step dad, she had to come to some measure of acceptance about the complex nature of her family. She said she had to wrestle with the pride that she had had about the type of family she grew up in and the nature of their relationships.

Later after we turned off the mics, a number of our panel members echoed that same sentiment. You know we often take pride in how others view our family. For example, sometimes divorced people feel the need to explain to somebody when they meet them for the very first time why they got divorced.

Kids sometimes want people to know who is and who isn't their mother and father. I wonder if part of the struggle around Mother's Day and Father's Day is, for some anyway, the day calls to attention front and center the changes that have taken place in the home.

Some of those changes don't make us feel pride—maybe instead, embarrassment. Hopes and expectations have not been met. Here's another Father's Day or Mother's Day that is a stark reminder of all that has changed.

As Jennifer said, pride has a way of making us hold onto things and put too much power in the opinions of others. What is really required here is that we lay down that pride. That very well could be a good first step toward acceptance, moving toward what is.

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By the way, your feedback means an awful lot to me. Somebody called themselves very helpful, five stars, said this, "I am thankful to have found this podcast. I often feel like I'm the only one struggling with my thoughts and abilities to make a blended family work. Every episode has given me a sense of community and hope that we can get through the struggles of blending our family. Thank you for this."

We do want to be a community for you. We do want to give you hope. I appreciate your comment. If you haven't left us a review or a comment like that please feel free to do that. That helps other people find the podcast.

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Remember to look at the show notes for links to additional resources. And, hey, share this with somebody. Text it to them. Send it to a friend. We all need a little encouragement. Most people are just like you and me. They have questions about life and they need community.

Think of a couple of friends or family members that you can share this with. Maybe post something on social media. Make an impact in someone else's life.

I mentioned earlier that our one-day livestream event *Blended and Blessed* is available online, so are lots of other resources specifically designed for blended families and dating single parents. In fact, the largest collection of articles and videos and resources for blended families, my *Smart Stepfamily Series* of books, curriculum are all available at FamilyLife.com.

Next time we're going to hear from Jay and Tammy Daughtry about the aspects of healthy co-parenting.

Tammy: When we choose to stay angry it doesn't hurt the ex, it doesn't hurt the other person. We end up captive ourselves and then the people that it hurts the worst are our precious children.

Ron: That's Jay and Tammy Daughtry, 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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