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Episode 103 : Alienated: One Child's Journey to Reconnect (A Parental Alienation Story)

Guest: Rick Marks, PhD

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Rick: When my siblings would come back from being gone Christmas or summer, I felt like I was the ostracized sibling. They're close. I'm on the outside. Me and Don were one year and one day apart in age, so we always roomed together, did our birthday together. We did everything together. We're best friends this day.

However, in those early days, I used to get in fights with him because I felt like "You don't care about me; you care about them. If you care about them, you don't care about me." What it did, it created a [unintelligible] mentality in me towards my siblings.

Ron: Welcome to the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast. I'm Ron Deal. We help blended families, and those who love them, pursue the relationships that matter most. If you're listening to this as it's being released, it's just a few weeks into 2023, and every new year holds great promise in God's grace. I just pray that this year you'll be walking more closely with the Lord than ever before.

I hope that you experience more blessings than you've ever experienced before, and maybe you've already experienced a few blessings already. One of the things that we're inviting people to do this year is to call us and tell us about that or email us if you would prefer and share what we call our promise land moments. You know, those moments where it seems like all the stars are aligning, all the hard work and things that you've put into your family is paying off. Maybe it was just a positive experience with somebody that you've been working on that for months and praying about that, and lo and behold, here it is. We would love to hear whatever that promised land moment is.

You can email us at blended@familylife.com. You can also call us and share the story with us. We might even use it in a future podcast. Check the show notes. It will tell you how you can do all of that.

As we're starting this new year, I just want to take a minute and point out all of the opportunities that *FamilyLife Blended* is going to give you for this new calendar year. Let me tell you folks, we are investing in your family; trying to help you grow as best we can.

So, for example, just a sampling of some of the things that we're going to offer you this year. February 13 to 17, Nan and I are presenting our Empowered to Love marriage seminar as a part of FamilyLife's Sandestin Resort Getaway Five Days in Sandestin. It doesn't get any better than that.

There's going to be live and virtual workshops throughout the year. You can find church ministries in your area on our searchable map. If you're still looking for a church that has a blended family ministry, you can take a look there. The Weekend to Remember®, FamilyLife's signature marriage conference, happens in cities all across the country all year long. We have a blended family breakout bonus session as a part of that event. You can check those out. There's going to continue to be more Women and Blended Families live stream events.

Speaking of live streams, every year, our annual *Blended and Blessed* live stream events going to be on Saturday, April 29th, 2023, live from Melbourne, Florida. So if you're in the neighborhood down there, we would love to have you come be part of the live audience. Otherwise, you can just sit at home or join a group of people in your local church and host it for others in your church and community. We'll continue to offer equipping and training ministry events for leaders throughout 2023.

And don't forget this podcast. I mean, after all here we are doing a deep dive on a regular basis, and this year we're going to be spending a little time revisiting some of the themes from my book, *The Smart Stepfamily*, which believe it or not, has been a bestselling book for blended families for 20 years now.

We'll be just returning to some of those themes and actually today is our first opportunity to do just that. Because in that book, *The Smart Stepfamily*, I tell a story about a young man who is alienated from his mother as a child. Today, you're going to hear directly from his mouth what that experience was like. And if you or someone you love is in a similar situation, maybe you'll pick up a tip or something that will be helpful to you along the way.

My guest is my good friend Rick Marks. Rick has a PhD in counseling psychology. He's a licensed professional counselor and a national trainer for all kinds of groups, businesses, social service organizations, military, faith-based organizations. Rick is also the founder and creator of Relate Well, a research-based curriculum that teaches youth and singles, dating and married couples, the essential skills and principles for loving well and having healthy, mature relationships. I am so excited to have Rick on this podcast with me today. Welcome friend, it's good to see you.

Rick: It is good seeing you, my friend. It's been a while.

Ron: It has been too long. You know we used to meet up all the time at all these big events and study together, learn together, share together, teach together. As a matter of

fact, I was sitting one day in one of your workshops, in a national marriage conference—

Rick: Orlando.

Ron: —in Orlando, Florida.

Rick: Yes. You had not heard that story before.

Ron: I had not heard your alienation story before and all of a sudden you go into this great story, and I didn't know it was you until you got to the punchline. I've just got to tell people; I heard you tell this story how you were alienated from your mother by your father. I was stunned when I heard it and it set me back a little bit and really helped me begin to think and feel more on behalf of people who are going through this terrible experience of parent alienation. Would you mind just kind of starting from the beginning and telling our listeners your story? What happened?

Rick: Well, I would want to say in that meeting, if you remember, my mother—

Ron: —was sitting in the back row.

Rick: I wove that story into my teaching on healthy relationships because I wanted to honor her, with all the stuff she had to put up with me. She loved me no matter what from afar. I had not heard—actually, you taught me the term—I had not heard the term parental alienation yet. I was like, “What is that called?” I knew it happened to us. I did not know that there was already research being done on this behavior, because that all happened to me in the sixties and seventies, right, when my parents—

A little bit background then. I was born to Richard and Barbara. I was born in 1961 and my dad had an anger problem. It's funny, my mother's side of the family, historically, Lebanese Muslims. I was baptized Catholic. My dad's side of the family were Ukrainian Jews, so I kind of had this Jewish heritage not really practicing Jewish faith. My father's father was abusive to him. My parents were married about five years, with four children: Kathy, Rick, Don, and Paul, and the ages at the divorce were 4, 3, 2, and six months.

And because the Marks—I was born in Miami—had a lot of power and influence—you know in 1965, Ron, as you well know, if a father got custody of children, that was rare, but he got custody of us. He was able to orchestrate things with lawyers and judges and my mother was denied us. Actually, we were taken from her. She was forced against her will into a psychiatric hospital, which she did not need, but that's what they did.

Ron: Wow.

Rick: We were then raised to hate my biological mother. I was not allowed to call her mom or mommy growing up. I had to call her Mrs. Como by her new married name. She

had visitation rights. She got us every spring vacation. Well, we call it Easter vacation back in those days. She got us Easter, summer, and Christmas vacations. In the early days of Miami, she would come down and she would get us when she would drive down from Cocoa, Florida and see us. She would come down, pick us up for a weekend and I didn't want to go, but I had to.

Ron: Why didn't you want to go? You said the word hate a minute ago; you were taught to hate her. You mind unpacking that?

Rick: Yes. My dad would always call her names, that you don't want to put on the podcast, to us in front of me. But look, I got to put a framework.

I am named after my dad. I'm Richard Daryl Marks Jr. My dad is my idol. I'm a Marks. I am daddy's boy. I'm first born. I want his love and acceptance desperately, but I never really got it. But as a little boy, you're loony, so I'll do anything he tells me to do. He says, "Jump," I jumped, right—anything to get his love and acceptance. When he said she's this or that, then she was, and so he's raising us with a mindset towards her. Of course, as a kid you don't know that, right.

You know much about parental alienation; a lot of times what a child says to the mom, or a child says to the dad is coming from that parent. I'm his mouthpiece, right. I would say things to her when I was with her, "I don't love you; you're this." I have no idea what I'm saying, but I'm saying it, because my dad's my idol and I do anything he wants. I was around 11 and he told me, "If you don't want to go visit that blankety blank, you don't have to," and I quit.

Ron: Wow.

Rick: I quit going. Now, my other siblings would still go. Sadly, Ron, about eight, nine months ago, I found old pictures of us as kids. I'm going to tear up saying this, Ron. There's pictures of my mom and my stepdad and my three siblings. I'm not in any of those pictures—

Ron: Wow.

Rick: —because I quit going. My dad would do things like, "If you don't go visit her, I'll take you deep sea fishing," "If you don't do this, I will do that." "Okay." Sometimes he followed through and sadly, sometimes he didn't.

I went through my life as a kid—by the way, one of the other things we had to do when we were home with him and my stepmother, we are not allowed to refer to my biological mother—her name's Barbara—we are not allowed to refer to her as mom or mommy. We had to call her Mrs. Como. Can you imagine your own child calling you Mrs. So-and-So to your face?

Ron: No, I cannot. Are you saying your three siblings, when they went to their mom's house, did they carry that with them even there?

Rick: Only two of us did.

Ron: Okay.

Rick: Two did not.

Ron: Wow.

Rick: And what's interesting looking back at it, how two of us were influenced by dad; the other two wouldn't listen. The other two wouldn't listen but I did. I was a staunch Marks, right. The only mother I knew was my stepmother, and you couldn't bond to her emotionally, but she's the only mother I know. I'm trying to bond to her, trying to bond to her and one of my brothers says, "When you think of the evil stepmother, that was her—always puts you down, not affectionate," but I don't have a biological mother, so she's the only option I got.

All my life I'm trying to get dad to love me and I'm trying to get her to love me. Sadly, neither of them could, because they both have their own broken backgrounds. I grow up just trying to connect, trying to bond, trying to be loving and nothing works; but all the while, from 11 on, I want nothing to do with my biological mother. When she sent me Christmas cards, I didn't respond.

And then a few times when I did talk to her, I was cold and distant because in my mind, "You're not my mommy. That's my mommy right there. That lady, not this person on the phone." When she would come to pick up us, I would stand by my dad, and she would take the other three away. Sometimes I saw her crying because I wouldn't come, but it never, it never registered in me that I was the pain; that I was the pain for her.

Ron: Because in your mind you were justified in remaining distant from her because of all the things that dad had told you and because this is just the way it is.

Rick: Yes, very much so. And you know, when you look back at your life this way, what you begin to realize later when you start to learn to think for yourself, right—mid to late teens—I started to realize that I was manipulated. I started to realize that "You robbed me of something." What I always thought would be a lifelong relationship with my dad, by the time I hit 17, 18, that turned to resentment towards him—deep resentment towards him, and I made a decision. "You lied to me," "You robbed me of something," and then I had a lot of healing to do from all of that.

My dad, just so that our listeners know also, my dad shocked us with a cow prod. I was around 10 or 11; my dad bought a cow prod used to shock us, so I didn't grow up in a really healthy home. I wasn't raised as a Christian. Whatever teaching I had about

Jesus came from my mom's side of the family when I was little through the Catholic church. I'm thankful for the Catholic church; taught me about Jesus. Again, age 11, you quit going because you're not going to visit them anymore.

I had so much, so much insecurity, so much hurt, so much fear. And the reality is thinking that my dad was the safe person, the one that loved me, the one that cared for me and my stepmother. You start to realize you're not really loved; you're not really cared for. You're always put down or criticized. You're not good enough.

If you know the studies of dysfunctional families, how kids merge into certain roles, I went into the role of the hero/the family hero. I got straight A's. I did what I was told to do. "Yes, sir. Daddy." I always did it because I knew if I always acted good enough to be the hero, I got some praise. The problem is once you achieved, there's more hurdles to jump, right.

Ron: Right. You're only as good as your last performance.

Rick: Yes, very much. I remember when I was 10th grade, I got straight A's. Now I thought, "I am going to hear those words, 'I'm proud of you son.'" We had 27 acres there in Powder Springs, Georgia, where I mostly grew up, and his shop was on part of the property. I ran over there, showed him my report card, waiting to hear "I'm proud of you." He hands my report card back after looking at it. He hands it back to me and I remember just standing. I'm like, "Well, did I do good enough or not?" He just said, "Go on." Well, a little bit later I realized he put a hundred-dollar bill in there. But I wasn't sure if I was still good enough, even though he gave me a hundred.

He paid me but what I was looking for was words. You know, "Well done. I'm proud of you, son." Never got those till the day he died. He's been dead 38 years; died at age 47. You're constantly performing and performing and performing, looking to them to give you what you want. But all the while what I didn't know I didn't know, Ron, was the person who could give it to me was the one I was raised to hate and not be around.

Ron: Okay, I've got to stop you just for a minute because I'm imagining somebody's listening and they are the alienated parent, and they are so desperate to be connected to this child or children, and they just heard you say that like all along you didn't know. You didn't know that you were the cause of your mother's tears. You didn't know you were wrong in believing everything your father had said and remaining distant and removed from your parent. You didn't know that she could have been the source of love and comfort and acceptance. Somebody's listening right now and they're just a mess because they so want that.

Rick: Yes.

Ron: We're kind of skipping to the end here, and I want to back up. We've got to get the rest of the story eventually, but let's just pause. What would you say to that parent who's listening and desperately wants to reconnect with her child?

Rick: Looking back at it, my mom did one thing that looking back at it was probably the greatest thing that she could have done that would return my heart to her. Now, I never bonded to that side of the family, and one of the reasons I didn't bond was because my grandmother, certain other relatives on that side, would put my dad down in front of me.

Ron: So just like your dad was putting your mother down, your mom's side was putting him down.

Rick: Some of them were, and all that does is reinforce my dad's right.

Ron: Oh, yes.

Rick: It might be right about my dad, so I would defend my dad to them. But one person never, ever, ever, ever said a negative word in front of me. If she ever did it, I never heard it. It was my mom. She was wiser to know "Don't berate his dad; never do that. Don't put him down." Now, my mom is a woman of great character. My mom is a woman of great virtue. Now, of course, I didn't know that because I wasn't raised around her. We got removed from home when I was three, so I didn't know those things.

Looking back at it, she had a lot of pain and received a lot of hurt. When my dad moved us from Miami to Atlanta, he did that without telling her. He did that to remove us four kids, so she couldn't have access to us. But it was my/her mother, my grandmother who found out where we were. They went to the courts in Florida and the courts didn't force him to move back. They basically said you couldn't do that, so you're now going to pay for their flights from Atlanta to Florida on her visitations. He had to start doing that because he made that decision. But by this time, I'd already quit going because I quit going when I was like 10, 11 years old when I was living in Florida.

Ron: There's so much manipulation going on in this story by your father. Sometimes people use the word brainwashed as it relates to parent alienation.

Rick: I've used that term.

Ron: I was going to ask you if you had, and if looking back, you would say, yes, I was—

Rick: It's a form of brainwashing; it is. Now I have one brother who's my best friend in the world. He wouldn't buy into dad's lie. He wouldn't do it because he couldn't stand my stepmother and my dad's abuses, and he wanted away from it. So our reactions to those things are very different. Don wanted away from them. I was embracing it

because that was/I was going to find my value and my worth in them. Don was finding it on the other side of the family.

Ron: Now that's a natural thing to happen. Somebody listening right now if you're in this situation, you know, siblings have different responses to the alienation that is taking place around them. Some believe the lies a little more readily than others. Others don't believe them at all. I'm wondering a couple things, Rick. During that season of your life as a kid, did you and your brother, did you not get along? Was that a rift there? How did that play out for you then?

And then I'm also wondering, what do you think it was about him that allowed him—now you said you had a deep loyalty to your dad. Absolutely, you know he's your hero, so that made you biased in a very strong way. What kept your brother from having that same posture?

Rick: Well, he carried my grandfather's name, so his middle name was Lawton, which was my granddad's name on that side. I think that personality differences, I really, I really—it's a hard one to answer, but I'm glad you asked the first one because even though it alienated me from my mother and the Seller side of the family, when my siblings would come back from being gone Christmas or summer, I always felt on the outside of them. I felt like I was the ostracized sibling. They'd come back; they're close, but they spent the whole summer together. They're close. I'm on the outside.

And so, me and Don were one year and one day apart in age. We always roomed together, did our birthday—we did everything together. We're best friends to this day. However, in those early days, I used to get in fights with him because I felt like “You don't care about me; you care about them. If you care about them, you don't care about me.” What it did, it created a ? mentality in me towards my siblings. Looking back at it, the ramifications of what my dad and stepmom did had far greater implications relationally than just my mother. In those early years, it created division between me and my siblings, particularly me and my brother Don.

Ron: You started around 17 or 18 having some resentment toward your dad.

Rick: Yes.

Ron: Tell us the process of beginning to see the manipulation for what it was and to come out of the fog, if you will.

Rick: Really, it came down to I was tired of being afraid of my stepmother. I was tired of being criticized, tired of being put down. My junior year in high school, I am so tired of being afraid and insecure, I started to push back. I started to rebel. I went to work at Six Flags Over Georgia. I worked two shifts. I wouldn't come home. I didn't want to be home; didn't want to be around either of them. That made her mad because I wouldn't do chores. I didn't care.

One thing about my dad was though I felt insecure around him, I never challenged him. He was an old Marine. I was not going to go up against that. [Laughter] No, I'm more of a lover, not a fighter, and so I wouldn't challenge my dad, but I would challenge Edna, my stepmother. I would get in her face because I was tired of being afraid. That led me to start to question things.

One of the ways my dad could always manipulate me if I was doing something I didn't want or he didn't like what I was doing, all he had to do—and he said it many times throughout my childhood—he goes, “If you don't like being here, go live with your mother.” And the moment he'd say that I would collapse and do whatever he wanted.

Ron: Yes. Again, how manipulative that he would use that heavy, heavy leverage of rejection. He basically is saying, you know what I'm capable of and how I think of your mother and that whole side of the family, and I can do the same thing to you.

Rick: Yes, “You can go live with them if you don't want to be here and do what I want.” I challenged that when I was 17. We were in conflict and that was a way he could control me but on this particular day—me and my stepmother in a fight, he's confronting me about how I'm treating her, and I said, “I'm tired of her blankety, blanking me and all that kind of stuff.” I was just angry. I wasn't a growing Christian either, so you know he had foul mouth I had adopted back in those days. He looked at me and goes, “If you don't like it, you can pack up and go live with your mother.” I looked at him and I said, “I'm already talking to her about it.” Ron, when I said that to him, I saw fear in his eyes, and I felt powerful. I went “Huh, he's afraid that I would.” And I thought, “Oh my goodness; this is interesting.” Though he manipulated me in my anger, and I said that to him, it sent a message: “I don't care.”

By the end of my junior year, I had some ROTC instructors at high school who loved me unconditionally, who sat me down during the summer and said, “You need to straighten up.” It was the input of those men, Commander Newman, Chief McLarin, that I decided “I'm going to change and become a better person for my senior year.” Then I did; I straightened up and still didn't feel connected to either my dad or my stepmom—got saved right out of high school, as a matter of fact, became a Christian.

A year later the Lord put me in the United States Navy, the chaplain's assistant. Then leaving home, getting away, what are they all saying? You can't heal the scene of the accident. It's hard to not be an alcoholic when you're in a bar. Once you can get away from the accident, you have the ability to look back a little more objectively. And that's when I began to realize, “Wait a minute.” Basic training you're busy, but you do have some time as the ponder. And I was like, “Why am I so insecure? Why am I so afraid?” I began to realize, “I have a lot of issues,” but I also realized “You raised me to hate my mother.”

The first step for me, Ron, in building a relationship to my mom was—I did basic training in 1980 in Orlando, Florida. Then I got stationed in an Air force base in Mississippi for my schooling for the chapel manager. My original orders out of school were to Keflavik, Iceland. I was so excited. I'm going to go see another part of the world. I get to go to Iceland, work at a chapel there, see another part of the world.

Then I got a phone call from what's called a detailer, which is the person who cuts orders for your rating. He said, "Look, Seaman Marks, I know I told you; you can go to Iceland. You can go," he said, "but something's come up and if I send you Iceland, I've got to kick a guy out of the Navy because of weight issues. But if you're willing to not go to Iceland"—he gave me 12 places I could go to around the world.

One of them was a place called Mayport, Florida. I said, "Where's Mayport, Florida?" He said, "Jacksonville." I said, "How far is Jacksonville from Cocoa Beach?" He says, "I don't know; about two hours." I go, "I'll go to Jacksonville." He goes, "What?" I go, "I'll go to Jacksonville." He goes, "You don't want to go to Japan or Europe, Philippines." "No, I want to go to Jacksonville." He goes, "Can I ask you why?" And I said, "Senior Chief, I was raised to hate my mom." I'm going tear up thinking about this, Ron. I said, "My mom's two hours south of me. I'm going to get to know my mother." And that's why I chose Jacksonville, because I made a decision: "I got to get to know my mom."

Ron: Wow.

Rick: In those early days, I would drive down on weekends and hang out with her and my stepdad and started to get to know her.

Ron: Okay, how old are you at this point?

Rick: Nineteen.

Ron: So, from age four, roughly, when the divorce happened to nineteen you had very limited contact and interaction with her. All you knew about her was what?

Rick: Pretty much what I had been told.

Ron: You'd adopted a posture that mirrored your dad's, and you were angry and resentful in your heart towards her and held her at bay. I want to—I'm not sure I got the details right, but as I recall you telling me this story years ago, it was a point in your life where you were praying, kind of calling out to God, trying to figure out why you didn't know your mother, why you didn't ever have a mom, I think it was.

Rick: Though I started getting to know her, I did not emotionally attach my heart to her until I was 30.

Ron: Okay.

Rick: And this is a story that I told; I was 30 years old. I was a professor at Regent University, Christian graduate school. I was teaching graduate students.

Ron: By that time, you had a PhD in marriage and family.

Rick: —two master's degrees and LPC and all of that; do marriage retreats and seminars and all that kind of good things. But one night my brother had called me, and we were talking. My dad had been dead for a while. He died two weeks before I got married. I'd been married 38 years and/but my stepmother's still alive and she was still saying bad things about me behind my back to my brother.

Ron: Wow.

Rick: And he told me that. Now I'm mad at him because I felt shameful. I felt, here I am, keep reaching out to this lady, and yet she still put me down to my brother. Now I'm mad, so I cranked up—11 o'clock at night—I cranked up a computer and I just started writing “Dear Edna,” and then I just let the poison flow.

In the midst of this dump/emotional dump, the Spirit said to me, “What do you want from her?” I actually answered out loud. I said, “I want acceptance. I want approval.” The Spirit said back, “She can't give it to you.” I said out loud, “Why not?” And this is what came to me, “Because apples don't grow on orange trees.” I was puzzled by that, and I said, “What?” And then this came to my spirit, my soul, “Where did she get it from?—acceptance and approval.” Her first husband was violent, and she had to divorce him. My dad was aggressive towards us but far as I know not towards her, yet he was very, very controlling. I'm going to do things my way, so she had to put up with all of that too.

Then it hit me. The very person that I wanted acceptance and approval from and always put me down, didn't have it to give me. I don't think she ever got it either. Here I am shaking an orange tree to give me an apple. When I realized that, it created a sense of empathy in me for her.

I have done a lot of research and writing around forgiveness, and I've come to realize that the litmus test for true forgiveness is you empathize with your offender, or it sounds like this, when you're being murdered on a cross, “Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing.”—empathy for your offenders. I forgave her because I realized she don't have it to give me. Here I am beating this orange tree, right, to give me an apple.

Then at this point I'm just kind of tearing up, crying, experiencing all this. It's healing. It really was healing at that moment, and so I said to God, “Alright, I'll trust You.” And then I said, “But I need a mom. I need a mom. Where do I get a mom?” Here the Spirit said to my heart, “You've always had one. You've rejected her.” This shows you how disconnected I was, Ron. I didn't know what he was talking about. I said, “Who is it?” I

said that out loud, "Who is it?" And the only thing that came back to my spirit was this phrase, "She gave birth to you."

I thought about that, and it was 12:02 in the morning. I called my mom; she answered the phone. I'm Ricky to the family. She picked up the phone and I said, "Mom," and she said, "Ricky," and I said, "I realize something tonight."
These are tears of joy.

Ron: Yes.

Rick: She said, what's that? I said, "You're my mother. You're my mom." She said, "Welcome home."

Ron: Oh, my goodness.

Rick: I think for kids like me, the thing we have to figure out is if you are still trying to get the orange tree to give you something and it isn't doing it, you got to quit trying to get an apple off an orange tree. It may be the very thing you have been looking for was a parent you were alienated against, and that's what I found out. The very person who had that I needed all my life was the very person I was raised to hate and reject. That was age 30; I've had a mom for 30 years, buddy. We have a great relationship.

Ron: That is so great.

Rick: I think my mom was wise enough though I hurt her. I think she was able to realize "It isn't Ricky; it's his father and his stepmother speaking through him."

Ron: Oh, my goodness. I love—

Rick: I honor my mom like crazy.

Ron: Absolutely. You know I'm just, as I'm processing that story, I'm putting the pieces together. You were 17, 18; you start resenting your dad; you start seeing through some of the lies. You start realizing there's something else. At 19, you reach out to your mom. You make a decision to put yourself in somewhat proximity where you could at least begin to reconnect in some ways. But even then, even then, whatever that amount of time that you had with her, it took a decade for that to really sink in, in that Holy Spirit led moment. I'm curious; during that decade, how would you describe your time with her and how you felt? You said you didn't really bond or attach to her, so what was it in those early years?

Rick: Well, I'm going to say it this way. I think there was some level of bonding and attaching. But remember, unconsciously, I still want my stepmother to be my mom.

Ron: Got you.

Rick: There's still a part of me that's expecting her—

Ron: Okay; yes.

Rick: —to give it though I'm connecting over here. What is that old—there's an old proverb—it's not Proverbs from the book of Proverbs. It's an old Jewish proverb that says, no one tests the depth of the river with two feet. [Laughter] You know?

Ron: Yes.

Rick: You just put your foot in.

Ron: You put one foot in.

Rick: Yes, one foot in, and you put it in slowly, right? Looking back at it, I think I was putting my foot in the river to see what this person really is like, because I already know what they're like—truth already hit me.

Ron: Right.

Rick: “You manipulated me.” But that doesn't mean they're not right about you.

All I found with my mother in those times when I drive down and hang out with her for the weekend; I found a woman who loved me, who cared about me, and there were times—this is what scared me—there were times she would confront me about things in my life and it'd make me mad because I knew she's right. But I kept thinking, “Who are you? You don't know me.” But she knew me.

Ron: You kept the stiff arm up. You wouldn't let her in.

Rick: She knew me. One time she told me, “You're deeply insecure.” “No, I'm not!” I was. She could tell, but she loved me enough to tell me the truth and I'm grateful for her.

Ron: Did you have mixed feelings related to your dad and stepmom?
Did you feel guilty spending time with your mom during that season? Was there fear?
“Oh no, if Dad finds out about this,” you know—

Rick: No. By that time, for me at least, my anger had got to the point where I realized “You've lied to me,” and so there is a part of me—particularly my stepmother that wrote her off—I just sealed my heart towards her. Clinically it's called an emotional cutoff, right?

Ron: Yes.

Rick: I had to do an emotional cutoff with her—didn't have language for it back in those days but that's what I did.

Ron: Yes, yes.

Rick: But with my dad, he died within two to three years, so he was pretty well out of the picture by the time I was 21, 22.

Ron: Okay. Wow.

Rick: And he died, so I didn't have to deal with that part.

Ron: Were you ever able to confront him about who he had been and what he had done?

Rick: No, but I'll tell you what I did do. When I finally got a revelation of who he was in his own brokenness, in that he couldn't give me affection, he couldn't give me approval—I was in the Navy still. I was 20 years old. Something had happened at my sister's wedding, and we were in conflict—but that day I went, "You can't do this. You can't build intimacy, so I made a decision that whenever I go home or talk to you on the phone, I'm going to tell you I love you and when I go home, I'm going to give you a hug and a kiss."

First time I came home on leave, got in the house, he stands and goes "Get away from me boy; hey boy." I walked up and I gave him a hug, kissed him on the cheek. He put me back a—"What's wrong with you? You got problems?" That's not really what he said, he said something else. I said "No, but if a love for a son for his dad means that, then I guess I am. Any other definition, no." I wouldn't stop because I realized he never had it and I needed it, so I just started giving it to him.

My other brothers who were still home—even though I left home and joined the Navy—they told me by the time he died, he was able to say to them, "I love you," and give them hugs.

Ron: Wow.

Rick: I realized my dad in his own brokenness, never having it from his father, was just acting out his own pain, his own hurt onto us.

Ron: I want to come back to that in just a moment, but I want to clarify something for the listener. I think Rick's experience, not feeling fearful of how his dad would react when he starts moving towards his mom—you know, not feeling those guilt factors—I think it had something to do with his age and growing maturity at that point. Younger children tend to really carry a lot of guilt about even the idea of moving toward that alienated parent when they start to reconsider all the lies that they've bought into all

along. That is a deeply troubling moment for them. It's ripe with opportunity as they think about what could be moving toward the parent they've been disconnected with. But at the same time, it could come with a great cost, and weighing that cost out is just so difficult. That's part of the insidious nature of alienation and what it does.

Rick: Yeah. The guilt they feel is because you feel like you're betraying that parent. It's to feel betrayal; there's where the guilt comes from. That if I was to go visit my mom, then I'm betraying my dad. "I'm betraying my dad. I'm Richard D Marks Jr. I'm Ricky. I'm named after him. I'm not going to betray my daddy." That was the early years, right?

Ron: Yes, right.

Rick: So that's where that guilt comes from. I'm not going to betray my dad.

Ron: That's right, and it is a strong, powerful guilt. It's paralyzing.

Rick: Very much so because you don't want to be a kid who betrays your parent.

Ron: Right, right.

Rick: You want to honor them; you love them. If I betray them, they may not love me. That's where it comes from; "If I betray you, you might turn on me."

Ron: You're so right in making the observation: hurt people hurt people, right. Shamed people shame people. What you were getting from your dad and your stepmom is what they were given. It's all they had to give is one way to think about it, you know? Barring work of the Holy Spirit in their own lives and a humbling down of their heart towards themselves and wanting to be open to other things, that's all they have to give.

Let's talk about that empathy thing for a minute, because anybody listening right now is struggling with that one. I mean, I would think naturally because if you're being hurt by alienation, no matter who you are in this scenario, it is really hard to imagine having compassion for the person who's causing all the harm.

Rick: It is, and yet this is the hardest piece to really embrace around forgiving and letting go. It's when you can come to a realization that your offender—though they did/what they did was wrong; it doesn't make anything they did right—that they're working and operating out of brokenness in their own soul.

When you can connect to that brokenness, it's no longer about you. This was their brokenness; this is their stuff. I can go, I can care that they are operating out of their own brokenness, in their own shame, whatever. It wasn't about me; it was about my dad and my stepmom and their stuff. That allows me then in a moment to detach from all the stuff I thought it was about me. You see I need approval, then I realized they don't have it to give. And how can I ask an orange tree to give me an apple? All I have to do is

accept him as an orange; orange giving orange. That's how I deal with my stepmother through all this. She's just an orange. She can give me what she wants and if she can't accept me, it's okay.

Ron: Okay, with that thought, I want you to talk to first, a child who's listening. Maybe somebody handed this podcast to somebody who's a teenager, young adult, and they're listening and they're relating to your story, and they're thinking, "Oh my goodness, that's me. I don't know what to do with all this." You got any thoughts?

Rick: Boy, no one's ever asked me that question. The first thing I would say to a kid is this, the parent who's alienating you, does love you. If they really love you, then you will stand up and say, "No, I still love Mommy. I still love Daddy. I still want a relationship with them." They're doing what they're doing because they're angry, they're hurt about whatever happened in the marriage and they're making you a pawn in the middle.

The gift we give ourselves—and it's tough as a kid, so if you're a kid, listen, it's tough. Even a teenager, it's tough. My brother did it. I didn't. Actually, my sister did it as well because she left our house at age 13 and she moved to live my mother and my— Here's another cost: when she left us to go live with my mom and stepdad, I wrote her off. I wrote her off. "You betrayed the family. You're the enemy now." I did that to my sister; I did. Not proud of it, but I did. God has healed every bit of that with us kids thanks to the Lord. But I would say to, to a kid, you want a relationship with both your parents, have it; it's okay. If they're using you to get at the other parent and you don't listen, they still love you. They still love you, but what they're doing is wrong. It's wrong.

Ron: It's okay to stand up, and it's okay to pursue each parent.

Rick: It is. And to the alienated parent—and this is the tough part, looking back at my mom's experience and hearing her side of it over the years when her and I have talked about all these things—you know, she used to cry; she never did in front of me. She grieved for many years. Finally, my sister moved there. Even when my brother Don moved there for three years and finally moved back, I said "Only reason he moved back, he said, 'I knew my mom loved me. I wasn't convinced Dad was, so I moved back just to make sure Dad did love me.'" He graduated high school with us.

But my mom never badmouthed my dad, she never badmouthed me. and she always, always, always, always, even in the midst of her deep pain and hurt, the rejection I would give her—I mean, imagine, Ron, calling your own mom, Mrs. Como, to your face. She never judged me or criticized me. She would say, "When you're here, you call me Mom or Mommy." That's all she'd say.

Ron: Wow.

Rick: I'm like "Yes ma'am," so I'd call her Mom or Mommy with Mrs. Coma in my head—you know that little defiant part of me, right, because you don't want to betray daddy.

Ron: Do you think she knew what was happening? Do you think she was able to endure that from you because she knew where it was coming from and that it really wasn't you?

Rick: Yes.

Ron: And she just kept trying to tell—I could only imagine what she tried to tell herself: “Just stay in the game, keep pursuing, stay persistent, be patient.”

Rick: As much as I hate divorce, Ron, they needed to divorce. My father was physically abusive, emotionally abusive, but she was so broken and wounded from her childhood and the craziness. It was her mother that finally convinced her to get out and stay safe after five years. My mom always felt like she failed us. And actually, looking back at it, though she left us, and he got custody, she was going to fight that machine down in Miami at that time. She did everything right. It just took me a while to get to a place where I could turn it around and see the truth and then position my heart to go, “Wait a minute, that's my mom.”

Ron: Wow.

Rick: You know, there's a little old saying: you got to let go of something before you can embrace something. What I didn't realize until I was 30, I have to let go of this so I can embrace that. I've got to give up the orange tree and find the apple tree.

Ron: And what a difference it made to start the orange trees,

Rick: Yes, very much so. And so, I'm great; I have a great mom. We have a great relationship. We're very close. You know I called her yesterday; we chatted for a while. We talk regularly. God has redeemed a lot, but I was the last of the four kids to come along. The other three did before me.

Ron: Well, Rick, there's one more person we haven't talked to yet, and I'm going to do this one.

Rick: Okay.

Ron: If you happen to be listening to this episode of *FamilyLife Blended*, and you're the person who's doing the alienating, first of all, I sure hope you hear in Rick's story how devastating it is, how confusing it, how much it fractures relationships that need/that a child needs in their heart and in their life, and your need to control the situation and alienate your child from their other parent is serving your need. It's certainly not serving anybody else's, especially your child's.

I also want you to just have a sense of the damage that it does, but also, maybe go read Proverbs 6:12-19. One of the things the Lord says in that is He talks about things that—the way Proverbs puts it is these are things that the Lord hates, things that are an abomination to him, and a number of them get caught up in alienation—a lying tongue, a heart that devises wicked plans and then runs to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, someone who sows discord among brothers, or in this case among family members. Seems to me five out of the seven things God really despises are included in alienation behavior. And I just want to invite you, please stop. There's a child's heart on the line. There's a family relationship on the line and it really needs to stop.

A special thanks to Rick for being with us today. We're actually going to hear one last comment from him in just a minute. To you, the listener, I want to say thank you for being with us. If you want to know more about Rick and his ministry, his work, his resources, just go to the show notes. It'll tell you how you can get connected.

If you want to leave a question or a comment for a future podcast, let us know; you can do that as well. And a quick reminder that FamilyLife Blended, our ministry, as well as this podcast is donor supported. If you'd like to make a tax-deductible contribution to our ministry, we would greatly appreciate that. Again, the show notes will tell you how.

And if you haven't subscribed to our podcast yet, please do that. We don't want you to miss anything that might be coming up. Now, here's a final thought from Dr. Rick Marks.

Rick: To that alienated parent listening, I would say to you, I know you're hurting because of whatever happened, and I know that there's pain and I know you're angry because of it, but in your anger, because of your own pain, you're taking it out on the kids against that other person. My admonition is, heal but don't turn your anger on your kids—to use them as a pawn against the real person you're angry at is that other parent, that other person. Go heal; care enough about yourself to heal, but in so doing care more about your children, so you protect them from adult issues and don't bring them into the middle of an adult issue. Let them be children. Let them love both parents.

Ron: Next time, I'm going to be talking with youth culture expert David Eaton about kids, culture, phones, and your child's other home. That's next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal, thanks for listening. Thanks for being a part of this podcast and episode and sharing it perhaps with another person.

Our producer is Marcus Holt; mastering engineer, Jarrett Roskey; project coordinator, Ann Ancarrow, and theme music composed and performed by Braden Deal.

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