

FamilyLife Blended® Podcast

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Season 5, Episode 112: Stepmom Help: Pro Tips from Jen & Bill

Guests: Bill & Jen Rogers

Air Date: May 22, 2023

Jen: I used to say, “It starts out it's a starry-eyed love affair, and then all of a sudden [slurp] you get sucked in this black hole and it's dark. [Laughter] You can't see a thing and you wonder ‘What just happened? I was so in love, and I was on cloud nine.’” And then when you come together in a household, when you vow to love one another—I'm/and we wrote our own vows and I vowed to love his kids as my own, and I realized, “I don't.” It's just harder to love your stepkids.

And so again, if you're listening to this and you're/you say, “I don't actually really love my stepkids,” I just want to say right now, “That's okay.” That is okay. Go back to the fruit of the Spirit. Can you be kind to them? Can you ask God to give you discernment so that He can teach you how to love them?

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. And if you're wondering “Why in the world do we do this?” [Laughter] Because we have this crazy idea that loving God and loving others makes the world a better place and so we want to try to help you do just that.

Well, it was just over about 20 years ago that my first book, *The Smart Stepfamily*, came out, and it was a few years later that I wrote another book with Laura Petherbridge for stepmom's called *The Smart Stepmom*. We had a lot of things that I wanted to say, and eventually we'd write a number of other books, but I felt like we had to talk to stepmom's first, and here's why. Because stepparenting is difficult, but being a stepmama, wow, it just seems like that's even more difficult.

On this episode today, of *FamilyLife Blended*, we're talking once again to stepmoms. We love you. We see you. We want to encourage you, so hang on; we've got some good stuff coming—some pro tips for stepmom's coming.

But first, we heard from Deborah who is about to become a stepmom. She wrote to us and said, “I'm a widow for over ten years and I'm dating a widower. We both have kids. My question is, how can I find information about widowers marrying widowers? Everything seems to be focused on divorced people and dealing with the ex-spouse. Are there any resources for us?”

Well, I've got good news for you, Deborah. Every book, every resource, every video series that we have done here at FamilyLife does have content for someone in your situation. Our livestream events, our live seminars that I do—Gayla Grace does speaking events around the country—it all has content that is applicable to post divorce, or post death of a spouse, blended family situations.

Yes, there definitely are specific sections in all of that material that is aimed at co-parenting with an ex-spouse, for example, and that is not applicable to your situation. Actually, there are some principles in there that still are applicable because the parent of your children that has died is still alive and well in the hearts and minds of your children and so there's this sense that they're still a part of the family picture. So there are some things that can be applicable in that situation.

My point is, even though there's content that is post-divorce specific and it does not relate to your family, I think you'll find that everything else has some application. and really everybody has to do that no matter what kind of stepfamily situation you're in. You sort of have to weed through whether you're a younger or a little bit older in life blended family, full-time or part-time, widowed or divorced, or some combination of all of that. There is material that applies to you. You just sort of have to parse it out and then make the application to your situation.

I think today's episode as well, not everything is going to apply exactly to your situation no matter what kind of stepfamily situation you're in; but generally speaking, there's some application there so we want to encourage you to listen, dive into this podcast or any of our other resources and harvest the material that applies to your family.

Okay, my guests today are Bill and Jen Rogers. I'm so looking forward to this conversation. Jen is, well, chief encourager, life coach, founder, and host of the *Bold and Blended Stepmoms*™ podcast. Jen, thanks for being with us today.

Jen: Thank you; so excited to be here today.

Ron: And definitely the lesser half, Bill, your husband, [Laughter] is going to be joining us as well. He's a stepdad. He's a pastor of Liberty Road Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Missouri, and he is studying to get a doctorate in Apologetics. Bill, thanks for being with us.

Bill: It's my pleasure. I'm looking forward to it.

Ron: Now Jen, I know you do the podcast on a regular basis. Bill sometimes joins you. Do I have that right?

Jen: You do have that right. There was a time for about a year that we did it together when it was formerly named *Stepfamily Mission Possible*. But after about a year, my joke and truth is that I fired him—with love. [Laughter]

Bill: Yes.

Jen: And he took—well, we're still together.

Ron: Well, that's good. Bill, you got fired. How do you like that?

Bill: You know what, it was necessary. [Laughter]

Ron: That's really good.

Jen: Here's—I was going to say it actually speaks to what we're talking about today; is that the heart of the home is with the stepmama. When the two of us were on the podcast together speaking, we needed to connect to two more people. Connections really start one on one and so I went back to where I started, where I just sensed that God wanted me to go back and talk to that woman directly to say that “You are a woman of influence. You have been given giftings and a calling” and it was about the time—God's been speaking to me about the minas. Like I can't shake the minas, okay. I've got to do something with my minas, and He taught me that my stepkids were my minas. I was like, “God, can we talk about this?” [Laughter] That's not connected.

Ron: For somebody who's not familiar with minas, why don't you give us a quick definition of that?

Jen: Yes, definitely. It's really the gifts that you have. What are you good at? When people compliment you about what you do well, you can say, “Oh yes, I speak well in front of groups,” or “I create connections. I'm a good communicator.” The gifts that you have, what you're really good at and what brings you a lot of joy in what you do, those are your giftings or your minas.

Bill: We found that women will open up more with other women than they will with men. And that was a discovery for us. I mean, we've certainly figured out in our own friendships and stuff that not everything should be both. I mean, sometimes you need to have a conversation with someone who's like you and going through the things that you go through. Because I can honestly say there've been many, many things that we've done in our stepfamily that I didn't understand the way she did.

Ron: Now that's interesting. Do you have an example off the top of your head?

Bill: Sure. Earlier in our marriage, we had some difficulties with my oldest son and frankly, Jennifer was put in a position where she couldn't win. I mean, where she had responsibility, but no authority as it were. I didn't understand that at all and that happens

a lot. I could honestly say I don't think all the dads do understand it; not that they don't need to know about it, but it is definitely something that the ladies need to discuss and come up with their plans for it too.

Ron: This is why I invited Bill to join us for the conversation. Because even though we're targeting stepmoms today, the role of the biological father, as her husband, as her confidant, as parent to his children, is so critical to stepmom experience of the family of the home, and her ability to even find her footing within the home.

What you just said there, Bill, helps our listeners, I think, realize "This is a team thing." It's not just "Stepmom's, you've got to get it all right and then everything goes well." It's "No, we're a team and we've got to work together, and we do see some things differently and how we try to hear one another and empathize with the other's point of view and see their experience and how different it can be, those are some critical pieces to helping stepmom's do their job well." So glad to have you both with us. We'll tell our listeners, you both brought two children into your blended family. How long have you guys been married?

Bill: Eight years.

Jen: Eight and a half years? Yes, it'll be nine years in August.

Ron: Okay, alright, so well done; keep going.

Jen, what is Second Wife Imposter Syndrome? You talk about that a little bit. What are you referring to there?

Jen: I do, I do. You know when you walk into a room and there's a gazillion people in the room and they're all talking and they're having this conversation and there's a vibe and energy, and when you walk in, everything stops and everyone turns and looks at you and you begin to ask yourself, "What am I doing here? Am I in the right room? Do I belong here? Did I get the wrong stage? What's happening?" You feel very much like you are being judged and you don't even know why. You don't even understand it.

And so, in the second wife syndrome, a lot of women will talk about, "Well, I'm the second wife," and they speak this "I am" statement over themselves: "I am less than. I will never measure up. I can't ever be the first wife." There's this sense of: "I'm married to this guy and I'm a mom, but not really a mom," especially for *instant* mom—first time mom/first time stepmom. There's a lot of sense of: "I don't belong here. I'll never get this right. I'll never measure up. I don't even know what to do here." We feel very much like we're an imposter; that we're in the wrong place. Like we love this guy. "I love this guy," but I thought "This thing, this is crazy."

A lot of women will say, "I'm done." I don't know how many times I said "I'm done" to you. I was done a lot. [Laughter] Because you just don't understand your role and you

don't know your role and even though you're having those conversations with your husband about how crazy you feel, you feel kind of crazy for saying that you feel crazy.

Because you feel like—especially when you've been married before and you come into a relationship, you say, “Well, I'm never going to do X, Y, and Z again because I did all that stuff before, and I'll never make those mistakes again,” except you are everywhere you go and so you bring it with you anyway. Even though you didn't think you were going to bring it, you bring it with you anyway. You realize that maybe you were part of the problem that you maybe didn't acknowledge in the past, and you want to deflect that because there's more unknowns in your relationship than knowns.

And you thought you knew—you know I had a list “This guy, he's got to do this, this, this. He's got to meet these criteria.” I was serious, and he met them. I mean, he just came—six feet tall was one of them. He just came in under the wire. [Laughter]

Bill: —over the wire.

Ron: —over the wire.

Jen: Or at the wire; that's right. [Laughter] But I did have a list because I was confident who I was. I went from this, having this extreme level of confidence and knowing that I wanted to be remarried, but then everything shattered so you feel like an imposter in your new role.

Ron: So far, I've heard you talk about the side of the stepmom's experience of seeing herself as an imposter: “I don't know who I am. I don't know where I fit. I don't know how this works.” But then there's that other side of the people in the room that you just walked into and they're looking at you. I imagine that the stepmom is sort of saying, “I'm not sure they want me here. I'm not sure; they think I'm an imposter too and so in their eyes, man, I am never going to measure up so why bother?” Is that sort of where it leads you is to just a place of frustration and is that why you wanted to quit so many times?

Jen: Oh yes. Yes, because I mean, we were fighting too, so we had a custody battle in there, and that was a few years after my mom died unexpectedly. It was the most challenging thing I had ever experienced so the whole visceral reaction in your body, your body responding to the stress that you feel. I lost my mom. I lost my best friend. I lost my confidence. I lost so many things at one time when my mom passed away.

When I recovered from that, I realized that I had learned a lot there about grief. But when I got to this custody battle and the grief that I was experiencing and the hurt that my husband was experiencing, and the extreme amount of anger that I had, I mean I was one angry woman. I was more strung out then than ever in my entire life. I thought I would never go through anything as difficult as losing my mom but having the custody battle—so the anger that you feel and the anxiety; it's not like you can cover it up.

And so, you have that in—the intimacy between you and your husband is severed and difficult. It's hard not to direct your anger at your husband because he's the one who brought these kids in here to begin with, and the ex-wife, like this bonus ex-wife stuff, it just blows my mind. I did not, I definitely did not sign up for that. Let's be clear, I didn't know—

Ron: Among the list of things when you're looking for, it did not include the bonus ex-wife.

Jen: It actually, it never occurred to me. I never even thought about blending at all, what it would—I never even thought about it, and I consider myself a pretty intelligent person. Like look at the things that are out there, but I was clueless. I was a clueless wonder. When you're feeling this imposter syndrome, you're reflecting on “Shouldn't I have known?” and the messages that you're getting from other people around you are “Well, you should be this way,” or “You should do this,” or “What's wrong with you that you can't figure this out?” and so you get surrounded by messages that seem to reinforce the doubt that you have in your own mind.

That's very difficult to overcome all on your own, which is why doing a podcast or having community or having the livestreams and the in-person events that you have, that's actually—I wanted to say this. I didn't realize it until now, but was it 2019 when we went to Virginia? That's when my husband got it because he heard it from other people. He looked at me and said, “Oh, I get some of it now.”

Bill: Yes. You know, Ron, I would chime in at this point and just say this: of course, dealing with the custody battle and stuff made me angry, and I wasn't angry with Jen. I was angry with my ex-wife. I was angry with the process. I was angry with the fight, and I was determined to win, frankly, because I thought I was right.

When I look back at that, you know I was leaning upon Jen for support and so I didn't realize how broken she was. I thought, “Well, you know, watch how broken I am,” and so there was not an understanding of exactly what she was going through. Add to that the brokenness of the children going from house to house and listening to the pain in their parents. I mean, that's just got to be difficult too and we didn't understand completely what they were going through.

I think when you add all that up and you put work into it and church into it and all this other stuff, we're focused on so many things and yet it seems like there's no time to really deal with the pain. And for me, as I look back, I did not steward or shepherd my role as a husband the way I could have to comfort her or just to maybe find a community like this at the time.

Ron: Just last night—my wife and I lead a virtual support group for parents who have lost a child. That's been the road we've walked down and so we are trying to give back

now. We just crossed the 14-year mark since our son passed away, and we're trying to give to others what other couples and people have given to us.

Just last night we talked about how my pain is my pain, and when I'm in pain, it makes it really difficult for me to see anybody else's pain. Friends and family members of a grieving parent often cannot really sympathize with a grieving parent because they have their own pain, whatever it is. To us it may feel rather small, but to them it is what is consuming their world and so they're now unavailable to us. We were talking about how incredibly frustrating that is to lose the people that you really want to have at your side when you're going through something really difficult.

I just sat listened to the two of you say the exact same thing. Jen was in her pain. Bill, you were in your pain and neither one of you could really see or hear the other person. You were hoping that they would be by your side; that they would be connecting with you; that they would be coming alongside and helping you deal with whatever the pain was that you were really focused on.

And instead, you found yourself isolated and disconnected and angry, perhaps with each other, and frustrated with each other. It sounds like—and I don't want to put words in your mouth, so you guys clarify this, but it sounds like that when you were finally able to sort of set your pain down and see the other person's experience and have some compassion for that, that that moved you toward one another, yes?

Bill: I think it certainly did. I mean, I know from my place I would say this: even when I was in my pain and she was in hers, she supported me. I would never say she didn't; that is, you know—now, I don't think I supported her as much as I could have, certainly. But I think when we were able to see, “Oh my gosh, this is so much bigger than us,” that's when some lights started to click. That's when we started to say, “You know what, this is God. God's teaching us some things that maybe we don't want to know, but we need to learn.” That's when things started to click, and we started to say, “Ah-ha.”

Ron: Jen, it looked like you were going to add something there.

Jen: I was just thinking, reflecting personally that if you want to win, you want me on your team; but after the win, get somebody to put me together because that's when I fall to pieces. I've got it in the fight—and this is what I've learned about myself—and that after the fact, then I've got to let you know about all how hard it was, but during like, “I gotcha. Let's go. I gotcha.” That's what I was thinking about.

Ron: It's good self-awareness. Well, man, it's already been a great conversation and we're going to jump into some tips, Jen, that you have put together for stepmama clarity, as you like to say. I like that. We're not going to be able to do all ten, and so I just want to tell our listener right now: go to the show notes and you're going to be able to access a PDF of the top 10 tips, pro tips, that Jen has put together.

Let's just go through a few of them. The first one I tagged: adopt a spirit of curiosity; curiosity, not judgment. Wow. Talk to me about that one.

Jen: It goes back to even in our conversation about imposter syndrome; that you're making a lot of judgments about what should be. When I work with women, one of the words that we eradicate is should. [Laughter] There is no should, because should implies shame. So should and shame go together because if you don't do it, then you've messed up, and shame is typically associated with messing up.

If we're curious about "Why am I so torqued? What is making me so angry?" then my brain is going to ask different questions and it's going to look for different evidence. If I'm judging and saying, "Well, they don't do it the way that I do it."—I remember my mom used to say that all the time when we would go and look at houses. She would say, "Well, I wouldn't do it that way." [Laughter] "Well Mom, it's not your house so it doesn't matter how you would do it."

Ron: And that does sort of imply they're doing it wrong, right; and if you don't do it this way, then there's something wrong about it. That's where the shame comes in.

Jen: That's where the shame comes in. When you're curious, you're giving yourself permission to ask new questions and your brain is so powerful, it will go to work for you. When you're looking for evidence of when you have connection with your stepkids, your brain is going to look for it to get that evidence for you. When you're looking for evidence of when it's been an epic fail, you're going to find that evidence as well. Really what you're focusing on, that's where your energy's going to go. If you're focused on, "I've messed up again," that's where your energy goes and so it really sucks you down. I'm definitely promoting a spirit of curiosity.

Bill: There's a lot of grace in that. I mean, sometimes we tend to show grace to others, but not to ourselves. I think that's such a good reminder for me. You know that spirit of curiosity and especially you've never done this before, that's powerful. I mean, give yourself permission to mess up a little bit. I like that.

Ron: I can imagine that the curiosity should extend to other people. Be curious about your husband's experience of what's going on with you or his children. Be curious with your children, your stepchildren; maybe even the ex-wife in-law who, what's her experience of this, rather than making harsh judgements about who they are and why they do what they do, yes?

Jen: Yes, indeed; exactly that.

Ron: Can you guys, either one of you, look back at how curiosity brought an insight that you just didn't have that maybe helped in some way?

Jen: Oh yes; immediately, I'll think of transition day. Transition day is probably one of the most powerful days to set your custody timeframe up for success. One of the things that, I don't know when it happened, but I started asking Nathan instead of the typical—he's a teenager. He just turned 18 so do not ask yes or no questions. Ensure you ask a question that requires a few words strung together. [Laughter] So instead of asking the typical “How was your week?” “Good.” Aye, yai, yai.

Ron: Yes. Come on, kid. Give me some more—than that. [Laughter]

Jen: He's quite articulate and I know that he can express himself very well; however, I started asking, “What do you need to be successful this week?” And the first time I asked that you could see the wheels turning, “Oh, she didn't ask me how my week was. She asked me, what do I need?” And what I learned from that is that it demonstrated an awareness that he was transitioning and that he had whatever process to go through and that he had a week coming up and I wanted him to know that we were for him. And we do say that to him now, “We are for you. We want success for you,” but asking him, “What do you need for success this week?” So that's the first thing that comes to mind.

Ron: —great example; love it; getting yourself in somebody else's shoes kind of gives you a different point of view.

Okay, second pro tip you've got is pray. Now, as people of faith, I think sometimes we overlook this one. Yes, sure, yes; that's what believers do. But my guess is you really, really, really want people to pray.

Jen: Definitely. Here's the thing that breaks my heart. There are so many women who do not receive prayer from their husbands, and the most intimate moments that I can recall with my husband are when he is standing over me. We are often standing, and he is praying over me. He is touching my shoulders. He is holding onto me, and he is calling down the power from the Creator of the world to say, “Will you love on my wife today?” or “Will you help her through whatever challenge she's facing?” and when you invite God into your marriage in that way, He will go to work.

Just for the record, I've also been one of those women who have said, “Jesus, let me not just excuse you from the room. I'm going to pick you up and throw you out and let me handle it. And then I'll come back. I'll come back; I'll be with you in just a minute because I've got something to take care of.” [Laughter] That is not prayer.

Ron: That doesn't count, okay.

Jen: For me, when I think of prayer, I—here's the funny thing, I almost didn't put it in there because I said, “Wow, well that's so obvious.” And I thought, “Oh, no, no, no, no. It's too obvious that we miss it.” And so together as a couple, if we truly believe that God is with us in our marriage, then we must demonstrate something that invites Him in on a recurring basis.

And so, in the mornings we have devotional time together. Every single morning, we read scripture together and we pray together, and I am a better woman. I'm a better stepmom because of that. I'm a better daughter of the king because I'm learning more and more every day who my God is, under the spiritual leadership of my husband and just—I'm not—submission is difficult for me. [Laughter] It's very difficult for me, but I am learning, and I certainly appreciate his leadership.

If I could say anything about prayer, I would say that pray with your husband. Men, if you're listening, this is no small thing. It'll make everything better so all the other intimate things that you have going through your mind, if you pray with your woman, all that other stuff is going to get better too.

Bill: Yes, I don't know when we picked it up as a habit, Ron. I know for at least the last five years we together have read the Bible through as a couple, every year in the morning, and that's just something that God's given us that has been really sweet. It's helped every area of life, like Jen says, but especially we do pray together, and we talk about what we're going through. And when we can talk about that and talk about it with God, then it changes. Because we all of a sudden, as I said before, we realize we're not alone. Not only is God here with us, but he's teaching us to help and love one another in a way that perhaps we might not have otherwise.

Jen: That's true.

Ron: I love that. You've got to go vertical before you can get the horizontal figured out. It's a constant reference to what north is and when you know what true north is, then you have a sense of what to do.

Here's a little—let me do a little side sermon, if I could, based on what you guys just said for our listeners. There's a lot of things about stepfamily structure that create complications and challenges that's inherent in the process. What you were talking about earlier about walking in the room and not feeling like you belong, that's structure. You're the second wife, not immediately the biological mom to the children where they just immediately light up when you walk into the room. That has to do with the structure of your home, but what makes or breaks families is not structure. At the end of the day, it's heart and the qualities and attributes that we find all over scripture.

I told a group last week there have been plenty of days in my marriage when I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what Nan needed from me. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I knew I was trying to unwind a part of me that had been difficult and had brought bad things to our marriage.

I knew not to do that anymore, but I didn't know what to replace it with. In those moments I always, always, always can go back to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control and that gives me a good first step.

There's never a time when those things are not helpful. And here's the cool thing; that has nothing to do with structure. You can be kind in a blended family, even as the second wife. You can be gentle. You can put on self-control in a moment when you feel like, "I don't know why I'm even in the room, nobody seems to like me." You could still find self-control in that moment, and it is a good response to really hard structural things.

At the end of the day, what God has laid out for us is applicable in every family situation. I just think sometimes we forget that—you know, we/the shame thing creeps in, and we think, "Ah, well because I'm divorced, because I did this, because I got that in my background somehow, I'm not worthy or capable or this stuff doesn't apply to us." Wrong. It's never about that structure. It's always about the heart of God.

Bill: Ron, what I love about what you just said—and we talk about this a lot and try to teach the church this too—you know whatever you're going through, that seems like the hardest thing. You know it's what you are going through. But the truth is, if you weren't going through that, you'd be going through something, you know. [Laughter] I mean, there would be something else and so your mind would be focused on something else. And what we realize over time is, look, the only people who don't have problems are in the graveyard.

Ron: Wow. Yes, so we press on, and we keep striving for true north. Hey, before we leave prayer, one of the things I see on your list is pray for discernment on your role. It makes me think of James saying, "If you want wisdom, pray for it, ask God. He's more than happy to give you that." And there's a lot of that in life. I don't care what it is—marriage, parenting—we need wisdom moment to moment and most of the time if you're like me, you're pretty clueless. Which is what this prayer thing is really all about. "God, I need you in this moment. Please lead and guide me. As much as—we just can't overstate this. I'm stunned by reading the New Testament and seeing how many times Jesus goes to a solitary place to pray.

There's something in me that goes, "Man, maybe I don't understand Jesus. Maybe I don't understand the Trinity. Like why does He have to pray? Like, isn't He God? Didn't He hold the universe together? Like who's He praying to? What's that all about?" Well, it's communion with God. It's a conversation. It's connection. And yes, I know my wife loves me, but do I really have to talk to her? Well, sure I do.

Jen: Of course, of course.

Ron: Thank you, Jen. Thank you. I need to do that. And of course, the Father, the Trinity, has to be in communication with one another, with the connected hearts, minds. I don't even know how to say that from a—you know from God's standpoint, but of course, and so if He spent a lot of time doing that, man, I can't do it enough.

Well, you got another tip that I wanted to talk about: be in community. I know that's part of what the *Bold and Blended Stepmom's* podcast is about. You want people to feel like they're connected. Talk around that for a minute. Why is that important for stepmoms in particular?

Jen: Because they feel like nobody understands them and there's shame associated with the role that they're in. Culture has not done us any favors, and so they feel like they're never going to make the mark, and when they attempt to explain how they're feeling, they're given solutions. They're given "Well, this is what you should do" [Laughter] by people who aren't in that situation.

And let me be clear and say that in your marriage, nobody else is in your marriage so the two of you are the most capable to come together and come up with solutions that are going to work best for you. That doesn't mean that you don't reach out and get guidance that you need, but it does mean that: treat the information that you're getting like you would a lawyer. A lawyer is paid to give you his expertise, but he is not paying your mortgage. He's not paying your electric bill, and he's certainly not living with your kids. So you take that and then it goes back to pro tip number one, being curious. Will that even work in our family? Or is there an aspect of this that will work?

When you come in community, you have a wide range of people from the very beginning to—so the shellshocked, I could say—from the shellshocked to the experts, to people who have beaten the stats, which stats are cultural. That's not God's economy. That's—culture says, "You're going to fail," but God does not. God says, "I've got blessings for you in your marriage if you will obey, if you will pray together, if you will come to me and let me guide you."

In community, you're reminded that scripture isn't some pithy answer. It's not, "Oh yes, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." I mean, how many times has somebody quoted a Bible verse at you and you know it's just junk, right. I mean, the scripture isn't junk, but it is not what you need right then. What you need is someone to say, "Gosh, we know you can do—God tells us we can do all of these things because of who He is and yet, when we're right where we are right now, we don't even know what that means so talk about what that could mean." And so, you get the support, and you see people who have experienced victory, who can mentor you and who can give you encouragement and support.

But really, they get your language. Being in a stepfamily is a whole new language and so they get what you're talking about.

Bill: And Ron, I would just say this. I mean, when we think of community, we often think of the church. As a pastor in a church, I can tell you the church has gotten this one wrong. We have not reached out to stepfamilies. I tell brother pastors I see all the time, "Look, 45 percent of the people you're trying to reach out there are in stepfamilies."

We really do need to get this. And if I could just say one thing, I mean FamilyLife Blended is a great example of a community, certainly that drew us in because we knew we needed community of like people. And so, stepmoms are like people. I mean, your husband doesn't get you. [Laughter] You know we talk about that.

Jen: We don't really want you to fix it; we just want you to listen.

Bill: Exactly, and we've had that conversation, so it's great to be able to be in community with people that like you, where you can let your hair down and just say "Ooh, I'm not alone. I'm not the only one here."

Ron: Yes; it's so important. Okay, so finding that because we all know—I mean, you guys, you've worked in this area for so long. Sometimes the church will foster that for people to get together, but if the church isn't. I can hear somebody pushing back right now, "Ron, I don't know where to go. I don't know where to find these stepmoms." What would you suggest?

Jen: Well, if you're here and you're listening to this podcast, this is one of many resources that can direct you to other people who are working to minister to couples and to—there are also, although smaller than stepmom ministries, there are stepdad ministries and stepmom ministries. It's certainly something that I have a heart to provide so we do have a Facebook group, and I know there are other groups out there as well. There are communities that are off of social too that you can be a part of.

The thing is it takes one step, and that step is not saying, "Okay, let me join the community." That step is acknowledging, "I'm going to have to admit that this isn't working." That is the hardest thing to do, especially when you go back to where I was describing, when you come in and you say, "Well, I know I've learned so much that I know I'm not going to make the same mistakes in this marriage." But you're not in the same marriage and you're not the same family. It's/the dynamics are very different and so it requires—it's the classic: you must identify that a problem exists before you can look for solutions.

So that's my encouragement to women that, hey, if you're hurting right now, it's so totally normal. If you're feeling confused, you're not alone and if you want some help, you're going to need to first acknowledge that "I'm going to need to reach outside of myself because it's too dark in here all by myself. I can't do this on my own." And God did not design us to do it on our own. He designed us for a community to begin with. So, reach out; start with this resource right here. Reach out, and there are lots of linked resources to get the guidance that you need.

Ron: And I will add, if you the listener don't know, that's part of what we consider our job to be here at FamilyLife Blended. We want to be a clearing house for ministries that are out there. We have a searchable map on our website where you can find small groups and churches that are doing something throughout the US and in a few places

around the world. You can always reach out to us. Email us blended@familylife.com. There are more and more virtual groups that are beginning to pop up, and we'll try to make you aware of the groups that we know of.

And if you have a small group and you're not on our map, you can do that. It's free. We want people to be able to find and get connected to points of community so feel free to reach out to us.

Okay, there's a couple others on your list I'm hoping we can talk about.

Jen: Okay.

Ron: You mention honor and respect your man. Okay, so this is getting back to that relationship with your husband, the biological parent to your kids. I was struck by something you said earlier, Jen. There was a season in your relationship where you were angry. You weren't even sure what that was about, but you, in part, took that out on him. Is that a common temptation for stepmoms to take it out on the dad?

Jen: Oh yes, because you've got to let him know all the things that are not working—with the kids and with the ex-wife and everything else. [Laughter] Definitely, because I think that goes to, because you're not in a community of other people who understand what you're going through and so we know you, you know, you've been doing this long enough to know that people don't raise their hand and say, "I'm an alcoholic." They don't raise their hand and say, "I'm in a stepfamily," because we're afraid of, really, rejection or judgment.

So it goes, I mean, it comes back to a lot of this shame that we've been talking about. We don't seek help until it hurts, right? Because I used to say, "It starts out it's a starry-eyed love affair, and then all of a sudden [slurp] you get sucked in this black hole [Laughter] and it's dark and despair and you don't know what to do and there's—it's dark. You can't see a thing and you wonder 'What just happened? I was so in love, and I was on cloud nine.'" And then moments—it feels like moments and it's really not that long after—when you come together in a household, you learn a lot about other people.

What's really going on is God is revealing some things about yourself that are really all about you. I mean, that's what God taught me in the first years of blending is that: "Jen, it's not all about Jen." I was like, "But what about this thing here? What about that thing?" I learned the hard way that it was really about the kids, and when I was speaking against the kids to my husband sharing my hurt, what I didn't understand is that I was hurting him by speaking against his kids.

And so, I don't know. I don't have words to say—say these words and then you're good to go—but maybe a note of caution that when you are honoring your husband, it is to know that he doesn't know what to do with that. Like these/this is my flesh and blood. I love them. I love you, but I don't know what to do with all of you together. Plus, that's where the outside influences come in and especially when you're dealing with

alienation. It makes it really, really difficult because there's so many things that you're navigating and so staying together.

When you vow to love one another—I'm/and we wrote our own vows and I vowed to love his kids as my own, and I realized, “I don't.” And that—I didn't even know how to. I didn't know what to do with that because I thought I was a very loving person. [Laughter] Turns out, it's just harder to love your stepkids.

And so again, if you're listening to this and you're/you say, “I don't actually really love my stepkids,” I just want to say right now “That's okay.” That is okay. Go back to the fruit of the Spirit. Can you be kind to them? Can you ask God to give you discernment so that He can teach you how to love them? Can you love them without comparing to how you love other people because this is a new person in your life? So how is God calling you to love this person? Allow time and experience to teach you how to love this person.

But back to loving him; I didn't realize—even now as we're having this conversation, I'm realizing I probably still need to ask him for forgiveness on some of that because I—Babe, I'm sure that I really hurt you. And that hurts my heart to think about that because I love him. I'm crazy in love with this guy. Like I didn't really like his kids at all, okay. [Laughter] Not because it was anything against the kids, per se, but the other thing is just like stepmom's, you're the physical manifestation of their mom and their dad never getting together again. And if you are a child who has lost a parent, it's still as a stepmom, you are the physical manifestation that that relationship and that family that they had is never coming back and so there's some—how could it not be that there's resentment there?

And the same, the reverse is true. The kids are a representation that you're not first, in the sense of you're not the first wife and there are complications with that. And so, I think, you know visible reminders that can cause our body to respond and so I think there's a lot of that that fed into my anger initially, but I was just exhausted all the time. Like, dang, you know, it was like one week I was this put together, inspirational, creative woman, and then the kids would come, and I was the monster in the mirror. I didn't know who I was. I'm like, “What? I don't have—this is my house. This is *my house*.” [Laughter] I can't tell you how many times I went, “Hey look, this is my house.”

And really, in the beginning, it wasn't their house. I would tell you “Oh yes, it was our house,” but not in my heart it wasn't our house. Like they were just visiting, and I couldn't wait for them to leave because it was so hard. Not because of who they were, maybe because of whose they were. I didn't see them as God's kids and my having a stewardship role. I saw them as my problem. I didn't see them as, “God has put me here on purpose. This is no surprise to the Lord that I married this guy. God put me here on purpose.”

So back to curiosity: "What am I going to do that—what was He thinking? God, what were you thinking? I mean, I think that's a fair question. God, this is crazy. What were you thinking?" [Laughter] And long answer.

Bill: I would say that Ron, again, I was not aware of all this when it was occurring. I've become more aware of this over time, and I don't know that I could have handled it had I been fully aware then. I mean, sometimes cluelessness is bliss. And you know, as much as she says, "Honor and respect your man," I mean, the Bible says, "Husbands love your wives." How? "As Christ loves the church." I mean, that's pretty sacrificial.

One of the things that we do, and we've done for a long time, is we have a date night every week where we can talk about stuff. And sometimes the stuff can be tough. Most times it's pretty sweet. But I would also say, because I love Jen so much, I realize, look, I've gone through her, so I'm not there. I'm not at the place where I was wondering if I could even move forward. No, it was never like that for me. I think the thing I didn't understand more than anything was the children thing and the hard for her, when my sons wouldn't love her the way she wanted to be loved or treat her with respect the way she wanted to be treated.

In the early years, I traveled a lot and so I'd leave her with the kids. You can imagine, you know. I mean, and I'm getting it on the phone and it's everybody buck up, you know? [Laughter]

Jen: Yes.

Bill: You know we've been able to deal with a lot of that now. The kids are older. Certainly, our oldest son now, he's about to turn 22. I mean, we're on the road and we've had some very helpful conversations, but even so, we still have some healing conversations to have. We know it; it takes time to blend. We've learned that.

Jen: Yes.

Bill: But I would say this: as much as Jen says, well, she didn't honor and respect me as much, I never felt that. I felt that she did for the most part. And don't forget, I mean, I have a very public role and she was always very supportive of me in my role so I will definitely say that for you Hun.

Jen: Oh, thanks.

Ron: You know I appreciate both of you and just the humble posture of owning your own part of that dance. I think a lot of times repairing comes in the form of, yes, I need to forgive you or ask for forgiveness for my part, but I also just need to stay in my lane, as my wife likes to say, "I just need to stay in my lane and deal with me. I'm not going to blame all of this on you. You had a part; I had a part. I'm going to own my part." And that's helpful as a first step towards figuring out, "Okay, what happened wasn't good.

Let's figure out how to repair and move forward, try something new and try to be more of a team."

You know to me there's a real bind in this whole thing, Jen, when you were talking about having really heavy feelings as a stepmom and knowing you need to talk about that with your husband, but at the same time not blaming him for everything or expecting him to fix everything or, you know taking all your anger or angst out on him, that's not going to be helpful either.

One little trick I'll just provide our listeners that has been helpful to me in our marriage is, talk around it. It's one of those things where you can't just say one side of it. In other words, if you take one side, then you probably won't be completely honest with your feelings with your spouse. Or if you are just totally aggressive with your feelings, then you're going to hurt them. And so, neither one of the two sides works but if you do both, sometimes that's helpful.

It might come in the form of, "Hey, look, I need to talk to you about some stuff going on with me regarding your kids, but I just want you to know right up front, I'm not blaming you. I'm not asking you to fix all this for me. I just sort of need to share this. I need to say it in a way that's calm. I know I'm going to try to be as honest and as fair as I can be as I deliver these words, but please be patient with me because I am really frustrated and I'm trying to manage that."

Now, saying all of that out loud hopefully dispels a little of the "I'm blaming you for everything" or the, you know, "I hate you," or just the extremes that are not really intended to be a part of the message. But then it does set up the conversation for you to say, "Man, son number one's driving me nuts and I don't know what to do about that. I just need you to hear this and maybe, we problem solve together." I mean, react to that, that sort of talking around it before you speak to it sort of strategy.

Jen: Well, it has me thinking, last night I had a virtual event and I always want women to walk away with one small thing that they can do. And so, I gave the illustration, you know when you're looking at your husband, you're having a conversation with him and he's like, "uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh" and you know that he got nothing.

Ron: Yes, it's uh-huh, uh-huh, but it's really uh-uh, uh-uh. [Laughter]

Jen: What I invited them to do was to ask their husband for 15 minutes: "May I have 15 minutes in the next couple of days. I need to talk about this." And then just zip it and wait for the husband to respond.

Women often—I know we've talked about this many, many times as far as women being this ball of yarn where everything is connected and men compartmentalizing, and so when you are chasing your husband down the hallway saying, "We need to talk about this," he just wants to run away.

Ron: Right, right.

Jen: I have chased him. I'm faster by the way. I'm faster, [Laughter] down the hallway; get out on the street and he'll run far, far away. But it doesn't do any good and my anger is growing and he's trying to run away. I'm like, "We've got to face the issue right now!" versus, "Hey, I'm really struggling, and I need 15 minutes of your time to have a conversation about this."

So that's what I'm thinking of as you give that [unintelligible] and that it gives you time to cool down a little bit and maybe even organize "What are my key points" because I know I can't give too much at one time. If you can just think about one thing that you want to talk about—

Ron: That's good.

Jen: —and let your husband know that, then he's got a little time to process, and it doesn't feel like an attack then because you've already scheduled 15 minutes of devoted time together.

So that is my strategy. That's what I was hearing when you gave that suggestion, which I think is beautiful, beautiful suggestion.

Ron: Bill, do you have any follow up thoughts?

Bill: I like the idea, and I told her last night, I like the idea of her coming to me and saying, "Hey, can we schedule this time?" because that allows me to say, "Hey, she's got something serious on her mind."

Now, my nature would be, "Hey, I've got time now," or whatever, and maybe she's not ready. I mean, what I said was, "I like that idea but then maybe once he's had a chance to ruminate on it for a day or so, actually schedule that time." Actually, sit down and say, "We're going to put it in the calendar at three o'clock this afternoon and we're going to do it," and whatever that is because he does have to make a transition. He's probably working. He's probably doing something. He's thinking on something else, and he needs to transition and give her his full attention. Otherwise, it will go nowhere. I mean, if he's/if his attention is not there, then he's just going to show her, or she's going to get the impression that he's not serious about it, and that could just lead to another—

Jen: —fight. [Laughter] It's going to be a fight.

Ron: And then you're both running down the hall again.

Guys, thank you so much for being with me today; what an honor; what a joy. I've enjoyed the conversation. I know our listeners have. Thanks for being with me.

Jen: Yes, thanks so much. God bless you, Ron.

Bill: Thank you, Ron.

Ron: If you guys want to know more about the *Bold and Blended Stepmoms* podcast that Jen does, look in the show notes. We'll get you connected to that and all ten tips. We didn't get to all of them. If you want to know the rest, the PDF is available as well.

And I'll mention that one of the things we do at FamilyLife Blended specifically for women, for stepmoms is our Women in Blended Families livestreams that take place. Gayla Grace hosts those; great conversation around topics that women in blended families are concerned about. Look for the next one of those to come up, and of course, previous additions of that are available in the archives on our YouTube channel and on Facebook as well.

Quick reminder that FamilyLife Blended is a donor supported ministry. All of your gifts are tax deductible, so if this has served you in any way, one of the ways you can say "Thank you" is by making a gift specifically to FamilyLife Blended. You can also just pay it forward and share this podcast with a friend or a family member or somebody who needs to know what we've shared here today or have access to the other episodes in the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast.

I want to remind you to get this on your calendar. Our next *Summit on Stepfamily Ministry*, that's our ministry equipping event for lay leaders, for pastors, for elders, anybody who wants to try to have a/the local church serving blended families—and you heard Bill talk about how important that is. He's a pastor and he knows how important it is—if you want to help make that happen, we have a ministry equipping event every year.

Our next one is going to be virtual. So instead of being in person, it's going to be a virtual event on Thursday, October 12th. Get that on your calendar; start having some conversations with some ministry leaders who might be interested. You'll be able to attend this time from the comfort of your own home or office, or wherever you choose; so Thursday, October 12th.

I also want to invite you to join us on the 2024 FamilyLife *Love Like You Mean It® Marriage Cruise*. This is an amazing, credible weeklong cruise. We take over the entire ship. Everybody there is a Christian couple wanting to grow and enhance their marriage. —musical artists, special performers, magicians, all kinds of fun, cool stuff, as well as a number of workshops on a variety of topics related to marriage and family life. And of course, we have some blended family breakouts. We would love to have you join us on the next cruise; be sure and look that up as well. The show notes will get you connected.

So next time on *FamilyLife Blended* I'm going to be talking with stepfamily coach Mike Haney about his new virtual course for stepdads. We just talked a lot about stepmoms. We're going to be talking about a course for stepdads. That's next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal. I appreciate you listening.

FamilyLife Blended is produced by Marcus Holt and Josh Batson. Our mastering engineer is Jarrett Roskey. Our project coordinator is Ann Ancarrow and theme music composed and performed by Braden Deal.

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