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Refreshment for Stepmoms

Guest: Ron Deal, Melanie Anthony
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Bob: There is often a desire in the heart of a stepparent to want to connect/to bond with a stepson or a stepdaughter. Melanie Anthony says you have to be very careful/very cautious about that.

Melanie: I tread very lightly in that area because do I have a great relationship with my stepkids? No. Do I have a relationship? We have somewhat a relationship. It has its ebbs and flows but I represent pain. So I'm the brunt of it and that intimacy, being able to talk to them, it's not there.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I'm Bob Lepine. How do you deal with the sorrow you may experience as a stepparent? When what you hope for in terms of a relationship with your stepkids just feels like it's out of reach—it will never happen? We'll talk more about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. You guys, do you remember—maybe I'm the only old one in here but there was a movie that came out in the sixties called *Yours, Mine, and Ours*. You ever heard of that movie?

Ann: I have.

Dave: All I know is you are the only old one in here, Bob. [Laughter] I don't know about the movie but—

Bob: Thanks for bringing that up. There was a whole slew of movies back in the sixties that were all about big families. There was a movie *With Six You Get Eggroll*.

Ann: Wasn't it Lucille Ball?

Bob: I think it was, and Henry Fonda

Ann: Yes, yes.

Bob: —in *Yours, Mine, and Ours* and it was—

Dave: What are you two old people talking about?

Ann: Dave is just a youngster. He just doesn't watch old movies.

Bob: It was a story of a blended family coming together and then they had a bio baby in the middle of it. So it was the challenges—in a comedic way—the challenges that a blended family can face when there's all of a sudden, an "ours" baby in the middle of the family. It made for Hollywood fun because they were able to script it that way. In real life, a *Yours, Mine, and Ours* situation can have some complications. You know a little bit about that, don't you?

Dave: Yes, it's interesting. My mom had me when she was 40. This was in the fifties so that was sort of unusual to be that old and have—

Ann: You are old.

Bob: Ann just confirmed that.

Dave: Quit it. Quit it. She was 40 and had me. Then I had a little brother and seven years later my dad walks out. Seven years after that he remarries and brings a stepson into the family. Now I am the biological son with a stepbrother. I have to be honest with you. As that family grew and I walked into that, I felt totally left out. I felt like my stepmom *really* loved her son and tolerated her husband's son which was me. So I felt it.

Bob: And you can imagine—you didn't experience it, but you can imagine what it would be like as a mom.

Ann: Well I know that as a new mom, a first-time mom, it was a hard adjustment for me. So I can't imagine what it would be like to be a first-time mom at 40, but also have twin stepdaughters—adjusting to that. That would put your world in a spin.

Bob: That's the story we're going to hear today as we listen to an excerpt from Episode 5 of a new podcast that FamilyLife® is developing. It's a podcast called FamilyLife Blended® with Ron Deal. Ron gives leadership to FamilyLife's Blended Marriage and Family Initiative. He's a well-known author and speaker. Probably the foremost person in America on the subject of blended families.

In Episode 5 of his podcast called FamilyLife Blended—which by the way you can find on our website at FamilyLifeToday.com. Just look for the FamilyLife Podcast Network there—Ron did an interview with Melanie Anthony. Melanie lives with her husband and their three daughters in Austin, Texas. She is the coauthor of *Daily Bread for the Starving Stepmom*. Her experience was much like what you were describing, Ann—becoming a mom for the first time after she had become a wife in a blended family.

[Podcast]

Melanie: I became pregnant seven months to the day when we got married. I found out I was pregnant at forty, and I looked at my husband and I said, “I am so scared.” He’s like, “This is what you want, right?” Because I told him before we were married, “If you want to marry me, you’ve got to give me a baby.”

Ron: He agreed.

Melanie: He agreed and so I said, “Great!” That was something that I’d always desired to do is to have my own child. We had a child, an “ours” baby. Everything just kind of flowed but it was still another dynamic because now I was *Mom*, not *Stepmom*.

Ron: Right. Those are two very different roles.

Melanie: Very different roles.

Ron: How were they different for you?

Melanie: Wow, that’s a loaded question because I feel like there are days when I put on many hats. The Mom role feels so much more unconditional than the Stepmom role, which feels so conditional. I think it’s so much about our perception but it’s harder.

It feels like this cloud of scrutiny, ongoing scrutiny—whether it’s something that I make up in my own head or my perception. I’m sure it’s my perception because others probably don’t feel that at all—like my stepchildren—they probably don’t think twice about something I may have said. But I think about, “Well, this may get back to the other house. I’m not really your *mom* so when I say this it doesn’t have as much authority or value to it.” I tend to scrutinize myself because—

Ron: You run it through the filters.

Melanie: Oh, like all twenty-five of them. It’s exhausting.

Ron: It is exhausting. I mean you’re working harder. I think that’s part of the experience of it is, “I’m working harder,” because you’re constantly justifying yourself—like, “Okay, if this goes through the ears of their biological mother, how will she hear that and perceive that, so what do I have to say? How do I say it?”

But then, it’s got to go through the kids’ ears. “But, by the way, my biological child is listening in to how I say it and I’m a little more direct when it comes to my kid than I am with my stepchildren. That may be affecting how they view me. ‘Mom, why don’t you ever say it that way to _____?’” Those are all those filters that you have to pass it through as you’re saying it. That’s a lot of work.

Melanie: It is.

Ron: You get starving is the way you guys put it in this book that you've written. Again, the book is *Daily Bread for the Starving Stepmom*. By the way, if you're a stepdad listening right now, there's stuff in here that applies to you as well. You say in the book, the day you became a blended family mom was the day you started fighting the evil stepmother stigma. Explain that.

Melanie: When you become a stepmom, nobody tells you about that. It's like before you have a child nobody really truly tells you what it feels like. Well, when you become a stepmom, nobody really tells you that there's a stigma that goes along with it, because the ex-wife or the biological mom of your stepchildren—you're a threat to her.

You have to somehow learn how to deal with that perception that she has. It comes out in really different ways sometimes. Because sometimes it'll go through the kids. The tone that is set with the children will come then back to you. But that stigma of—I mean just like Cinderella—the stigma is there of, "I'm not evil. I'm actually added here. I'm trying to add things to your children's lives, not take away."

But the threat there from—that I am because what I represent to the biological mom is a failed marriage / a failed relationship / something that she didn't have, because my husband and I have a great relationship. Although she's remarried—a lot of biological moms remarry—but I represent pain, so I'm the brunt of it. I always say to my husband, "She doesn't hate you. She hates me."

Ron: Even in the best scenario, the best-working relationship, you're still a reminder of a painful time in her life—if not an ongoing pain now. That's hard to shake.

Melanie: It is.

Ron: Can you think of a time—is there a story you can share—that just kind of conveys how you—dealing with how the kids were viewing—that stigma from the kids or the stigma from her?

Melanie: I tread very lightly in that area because do I have a great relationship with my stepkids? No. Do I have a relationship? We have somewhat a relationship. It has its ebbs and tides; it flows. But that intimacy, being able to talk to them about things like that, it's not there.

Ron: In particular, when there's a difference between your biological daughter and your stepdaughter, do you find yourself drifting towards what's easy—that is, the relationship with your biological daughter? It's more clearly defined. You don't have to go through all the filters of what I say. Is that a natural drift, do you think?

Melanie: It is a natural drift, and the way my stepdaughters look at it as they look at it as unfair treatment. I think that is such a good point there Ron—is that you know, my husband is not a stepparent. He's just a bio dad. He's the father to all of our children. But when push comes to

shove, he's on the couch with his twin daughters and I'm in the other room with our bio daughter.

So that division—and I think we have to be really careful about the division in the home—it's a natural thing. Because Momma Bear comes in, and I'm like, "Come on let's go." He just wants peace.

Ron: Right.

Melanie: Then that separation begins and then what is affected? Our marriage, because we can't agree.

Ron: Sure, let's unpack that for a minute. when there is a stress or a strain that takes place within the home that your husband who's, "Hey, why can't all you get along?" But at the end of the day, if he feels like his girls are off by themselves, he may just drift that direction to comfort them—not necessarily to oppose you or to make a statement to the biological daughter you guys share—but just to offer some comfort that they're not all alone in this.

Your natural drift is back toward your biological daughter. So there you have it. You're with one, and he's with the other two. Does it almost feel in that moment to you like he's with them—more loyal to them?

Melanie: I don't think it's a loyalty. I think there is whether you want to call it guilt or shame associated with the divorce, so you want to make sure whatever you do over the top, whether you buy them more things—which is not us—or you coddle them more or you bring them in more, whatever it is to reaffirm to them that they're loved.

Ron: Again, what you're describing I think is very real. It's not that anybody's necessarily choosing, "I choose my kids over my wife." I think sometimes it's just that, "I don't know what else to do. It just feels like somehow the girls are all alone, so I'm just kind of hanging with them to let them know, we still love them—they're still cared for. I want my girls to still feel like they're around and they want to be a part of our home."

Yet that adds some stress to your marriage. It adds a little stress to your relationship to your stepdaughters, "Dad's on our side but you're kind of on the other side." I even wonder about the stepsibling relationship, like your stepdaughters and your biological daughter. Does that end up affecting them?

Melanie: Oh, I'm so glad you mentioned that. That is our number one struggle is—it's sad when a child is involved in a divorce because it's a loss—it's heartbreaking. People focus on the children of divorce, as they should, but what I think gets neglected are the children that are brought into the marriage naturally.

Ron: The "ours" baby.

Melanie: The “ours” baby, they just think that they just go into the fold and they don’t. We struggle greatly with that. The relationship with the steps and the bio and it is the *number one* issue that we have in our marriage. Whether one’s parenting the other too soft or too hard or whether, “You don’t understand that you need to discipline this one.” “No, I don’t.”

It just—“What is fair? What isn’t fair?” The “ours” child—all she says to me is, “I just want to feel a part.”

Ron: Wow! Yes, I can see what a struggle that would be because your biological daughter is not guilty of making any of this happen. Yet she feels isolated and alone in some ways. Which just tugs on your heart, I would think.

Melanie: That’s when Momma Bear comes out.

Ron: And you get protective.

Melanie: Very protective.

Ron: Which means you might have to be more critical of the other side, if you will, your stepdaughters and then maybe your husband indirectly because he’s kind of over there with them.

Melanie: I mean it’s exhausting.

Ron: It is.

Melanie: You know, my husband will say, “You know there are some good parts about being a stepmom.” I’m like, “I know, there *are*. It’s a blessing. I feel like God chose me, but it’s also very hard.” Sometimes he reminds me—he goes, “You talk about how hard it is too much—like you don’t talk about the blessing and the value that you add to them and that they add to you, because sometimes you just get so caught up in all of the emotion of it all,” because it is a lot of emotion.

Ron: In what’s not going right.

Melanie: In what’s not going right.

Ron: Because that’s always where your focus is/your attention is, because you want those things to improve. Yes, we naturally give a lot of time and energy to what’s not going well rather than recognizing what *is* okay. Where’s the hope? Where’s the encouragement? Like what are the things you would encourage somebody who’s listening? Maybe it’s not the exact same circumstances as you but there’s a pain somewhere in the emotional body of their family and it’s drawing all their attention. What would you say to them?

Melanie: I would say that without God you cannot do any of this. You cannot. I think blended families are God's pride and joy, meaning, here's My restoration—here's My redemption. so get connected to a church. Get connected to a tribe or community of like-minded people that can walk you through the good and the bad and the ugly and that have your back. That's really important.

Ron: That's really important.

Melanie: If I could tell a story. This is a great story. Early on in our marriage, I felt like I was on an island all by myself. So one thing that I used to say to him early on was, "I just want you to get on my island. Just get on my island and know what this feels like because this is tough. This is gut wrenching. This is horrible. You're not a stepdad; you don't get it."

He came home—this was many years ago—he came home one day and he said, "I had an epiphany." I'm like, "That's great honey. Great." I'm cooking dinner. My youngest is just a baby.

We get done with dinner and all five of us were at the dinner table and he said, "I want to say something." He turned to me and he looked at me and said, "I am so sorry," and he apologized. He said, "I'm so sorry I haven't tried to understand more of what you have to do to run this family and to be a stepmom and to be a mom." He just apologized.

He says, "I'm on your island now because," he goes, "I had lunch with a good friend today." His good friend is a full-time stepdad. He asked his friend, "What is it like?" His friend said, "It stinks." Because let me go on to tell you a story that his friend who is the full-time stepdad went to every single wrestling match, but who got invited to the banquet at the end of the year? Not the stepdad.

When he said that to my husband, "It stinks. It's rough. It's hard." The light bulb went off in my husband's head going, "Wow, it must really be *tough*." When he came home and had this huge apology, it was that empathy that he had for, "You know what, Honey, I get it. It's tough. I'm sorry I haven't tried to understand more."

We were all in tears. It was a really pivotal moment in our family life and even in the unity of our marriage for him just to say, "I *am* your number one cheerleader, and I will do all it takes to support you through this role."

Ron: How did that make you feel?

Melanie: I was just like, "Somebody gets it." Not that he truly gets it, but to be empathetic to the pain and the hardship, the challenges that I face, and to have grace for when I need it the most. It was just so comforting.

[Studio]

Bob: Well again, that's Melanie Anthony in Episode 5 of Ron Deal's new podcast which is called FamilyLife Blended. It's a part of the FamilyLife Podcast Network and we just heard a portion of the extended conversation that Ron had with Melanie about the challenges of being a biological mom for the first time at 40 and then being a stepmom to twins. I think what she's talking about here is something that is true whether you're in a stepfamily or an intact family, and that is if you're on the island and you feel like you're alone on the island, that's an awful place to be.

Ann: Can I tell you that we as women do not want to be on the island alone. We *want* our men to be on there with us—to understand, to be empathetic, and to relate to where we are. I don't know if men are like that. Can you be on the island alone?

Dave: No, I think men cover it up. When you said women, of course, you're right—because you're always right honey, but—

Ann: I am.

Dave: I was just thinking “Nobody wants to be on the island by themselves. Nobody wants to be voted off the island. They don't want to be alone.” The beauty of this story was the caring empathy that he discovered with his wife. I mean we all long for someone to see us and to care. It was such a beautiful moment when he was able to almost have a revelation of where she's been living, and he came alongside her.

Bob: Then to step in and apologize with the kids in the room.

Ann: Oh, that's big.

Bob: That is big, isn't it?

Dave: Oh, it's huge. You talk about humility. It made me think Ephesians 4. Listen to what Paul says—I mean what a great passage. He says, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” When you read that verse, you're like “Oh, live a life worthy of the calling—that's righteousness. It's preaching the gospel.” And you're thinking “What's he going to say?” Look what he says. Verse 2 he says, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” It's just a beautiful picture. He says “What does that life look like?—humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another—which is exactly what he did. He's literally being the face in the presence of Jesus for his wife and now his whole family. What a beautiful picture.

Ann: And we can only do that through God's power. He's the one that brings our spouse to the island. So I think we need to be continually praying for reconciliation that only God can do.

Dave: I've got to say as I listen to story which is unbelievable for them, I'm thinking “Would anyone say that about me? That I'm humble and gentle and patient. I come alongside when

they're on the island." Would anyone say that about you? That is a life worthy of the calling of Jesus. In fact, that is the life we're called to live.

Bob: And are there husbands and wives listening who need to sit down with their spouse tonight, maybe with the kids in the room, and say "I haven't been on the island. I've left you alone. I haven't been engaged. I've been detached. I've been focused on other things and I'm ready for that to change. I'm going to be here. I'm going to be with you. I'm going to understand what you're going through." That could be a turning point in your marriage/in your family.

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