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What Adult Children Need When They Get Married

Guests: Dennis and Barbara Rainey
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Bob: Alright; imagine this scene—one of your children was recently married. She is now back from the honeymoon—been back in town for a couple of days, and you haven't heard from her. Do you call her, or do you wait for her to call you? Here's Barbara Rainey.

Barbara: I think that the best course is to give your children as much freedom as you can, and then let them invite you back into their lives rather than showing up all the time and calling every day and there being a sense of "Just leave us alone!" because sometimes parents are over-involved from the beginning when they—what that other person really needs is for them to step back and be invited.

This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. Are you giving your adult children the space they need? We'll talk more about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. We're talking this week about parents dealing with adult children and how our relationship, as parents, has to change as our children become adults. I always think about Stu Weber's wife Linda, who joined us years ago on *FamilyLife Today*—the point that she made when her son had just gotten engaged—you remember this story; right?

Dennis: I do remember the illustration she used.

Bob: She gave a present to her daughter-in-law, and it was the night of the rehearsal dinner; right?

Dennis: Right.

Bob: And the daughter-in-law opened up the box and pulled out two strips of cloth—

Barbara: Apron strings.

Dennis: —that had been clipped.

Bob: It was Linda's way of saying: "The relationship is changing—I acknowledge that. The apron strings belong to you now."

Dennis: Yes; and to talk about the apron strings—we bring Barbara back to the studio, my bride now since 1972.

Bob: Have you clipped off some apron strings?

Barbara: We *have*.

Dennis: No doubt about it!

Barbara: We have.

Dennis: Contrast that with parents who *lengthen* the apron strings when their kids get married.

Bob: The tether, you mean?

Dennis: Oh my goodness!—and the problems that that brings! You know, in raising kids, you move from high control to ultimately no control. You move from *total* influence to—how should I say it?—minimal influence—

Bob: Limited influence?

Dennis: Limited influence—

Barbara: Yes.

Dennis: —maybe that's the better way to state it.

Bob: Well, and that's what I'm wondering: "Does the relationship between a parent and child change to the point where there *is* virtually no influence / where there *is* no control?—or once they're married, do you still have some level of control?"

Dennis: Yes; it can move to that Bob—at the decision of the child. It really does depend upon the adult child, if he or she is going to allow the parent, or the parents, to influence them.

Barbara: For us, we really wanted to be invited into our adult children's lives as opposed to *assuming* that we could have influence. We wanted to have some influence—we still wanted to keep the relationship going—and we hoped they would call and ask for advice on buying their first house, or a job, or some of those kinds of things; but we didn't *assume* that would be the case. We didn't want to presuppose anything with them because we wanted them to *want* our involvement in their lives.

Bob: And you've gotten that invitation from your children; right?

Barbara: Yes.

Bob: If you *hadn't* gotten it—let's assume for a moment that a child didn't call and ask for your opinion on buying a first house, changing a job—any of these things. There was still a cordial relationship but a clear signal of distance.

Dennis: Hands off.

Bob: Would you observe those boundaries and say, "That's the way it ought to be"?

Barbara: Yes; because to do otherwise is to not really give them their freedom—it's to not give the apron strings / it's to say, "I still know better than you, and you need me." All that's going to do is create resentment and hostility, and it's just not healthy for our relationship. So, I think if any of our kids had made it clear that they didn't want our advice, or our thoughts, or our counsel, we wouldn't have given it.

Dennis: We're talking here about what adult children need when they get married.

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: I think they have some very specific needs. First, they need the blessing and the approval of their parents as they begin to establish this new relationship that they've never had before—that they've never experienced before. They need us to, I think, provide—if not in a ceremony, certainly through our words and our attitudes—a sense of sending them into the marriage and commissioning them in this new relationship.

It occurred to me when Ashley married Michael, Benjamin, our son, married Marsha Kay, Samuel married his wife Stephanie that all three of these men at this life state, needed an older man, a father figure in their lives to bless them in their new role as a husband. So what I gave each of those young men was a poem that I wrote called *Be The Man* or *Be God's Man*. I wrote three unique poems that were charges as well as a blessing to each of these young men as they started as husbands. To commemorate that I not only framed that and read it to them, but I also gave them a sword. We found the first one at the Army/Navy Surplus then went online to find additional swords, but these were the real deal. These were not toy swords. These were sharp as razors and made of finely honed steel. Today, in all three of these men's lives, they have the charge to manhood, to be God's man in marriage and family, and their swords hanging in their homes. I have to believe that it's more than just symbolic. I think it was a statement of a passage for a young man to say, "I have a sense of identity. I know where I'm going and I know where I'm supposed to be." And Bob, when you do this as a parent you're not only helping them establish their identity, you also establishing how you're going to relate to them in their new assignment.

Bob: Barbara, the Scriptures say that in marriage, we are to leave father and mother—we're to cleave to husband and wife. There is a level of independence that is prescribed

by the Scriptures for marriage. I think the question is, "How complete is that independence?" That's where it gets fuzzy; you know?

Barbara: Yes; it really does. That's why I think that the best course is to give your children as much freedom as you can, and then let them invite you back into their lives. I would rather err on being *less* involved and have my kids say, "Why don't you call us more often?" and "We want you to come visit more often," rather than showing up all the time, and calling every day, and there being a sense of "Just leave us alone!" you know; because that can happen.

I think sometimes parents are so eager to continue that relationship and to get to know the new person in the family / the new spouse that they are over-involved from the beginning, when they—what that other person really needs is for them to step back and be invited.

Bob: Have some space; yes. But what if the invitation back in, on the part of the child, is really an invitation, saying, "I want you to be my parent again,"—

Barbara: Yes; that could happen.

Bob: —or "I want you to—

Barbara: —"...rescue me," or "...help me out financially."

Bob: What about that?

Barbara: Well, I think parents just need to be discerning and understand what the request really is and not get sucked into rescuing this couple, because the young man needs to be the provider and the leader of the family. For parents to step back in and assume that, at any level, is to undermine him as the husband.

Dennis: Genesis, Chapter 2:24-25 makes it real clear: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." If we're not careful, as parents of adult children, as they get married, we'll undermine a spouse, whether it be a male or a female.

We'll undermine their relationship—

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: —create divided loyalties. Your children must leave *you*.

Barbara: That's right.

Dennis: Your children must leave *you* if they are going to *cleave* to their spouse. And if *you* attempt to undo the cleaving by pulling them back towards yourself—either through

manipulation, through anger, through pouting. I've had adult children tell me all kinds of ways that parents have tried to get their way through them. In the process, they have become *dangerous* to the success of the marriage relationship.

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: I just want to underline what Barbara said: "If you have to err on one side or the other,"—and this is our firm conviction—"I would rather our children be inviting us back in than telling us to get out!"

Bob: But if they're inviting you back, as parents—if they're saying: "Rescue us," "Save us," "Help us," —you've got to be discerning in that.

Barbara: Yes.

Dennis: You really do.

There is one other thing I want to point out here too. Your children are constantly going to be looking into your face for approval—they looked into your face for 18, 20, 20-plus years. What you have to be careful, as parents, is that you give an appropriate amount of encouragement—cheering them on, putting your arm around them and telling them what a great job they've done—but then, at points, when they surprise you, or they shock you, or they make a wrong choice—tell your face to play poker / I mean, put on a poker face. Do *not* scowl at them, judge them, or become critical of them. For some of us, who tend to wear our feelings on our sleeves and are very open people, that becomes very difficult.

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: I have, on more than one occasion—as I've related to our adult children—I've had to just kind of, internally, go: "Now, Dennis, keep your emotions. They are their own person. They are not a six-year-old," even though they may be *acting* [Laughter] like they're a bit younger—maybe not like a six-year-old. And, of course, these would not be *our* children to do this.

Bob: Right!

Dennis: But you will find, as you raise adult children, who get married—their values will not be your values. They're going to have their own, and you have to give them freedom to have their own values.

Barbara: That's right.

Bob: Some of the best advice I remember hearing on this particular topic came as we were interviewing Carolyn Mahaney and her three daughters. Carolyn said the girls would call regularly and say: "Mom, what do you think I should do about this?" "What's

your advice here?" I remember her saying that her first question back to them was always, "Well, what does your husband think?"

Dennis: Yes.

Bob: I thought, "Now that's shrewd."

Dennis: It is.

Barbara: Very wise.

Bob: That's a mom who understands that the loyalty and the allegiance needs to be transferred.

Your daughters and daughters-in-law have invited you *into* their lives. Did they know they were supposed to do that?

Dennis: You know, Bob, before our children were married, we told them that up until the point where they tied the knot, we had a few things we—

Bob: —you were still going to say.

Dennis: —we were still going to say, and some coaching tips, and maybe some final shaping of even an adult child before they got married, where we felt like: "You know what? Before you take on this commitment, this is fair game. This is a healthy discussion. We're going to talk to you about how you two come together in this thing called marriage and maybe some patterns in your life that we see will impact your marriage."

But we told them: "After you get married, if you want our opinion, you're going to have to ask for it. That means—if you want our help and our opinion about some issue between you and your spouse, you're going to have to ask for it.

"If you want some help about disciplining children after you start having children, you'll have to invite us back in to do that."

And, Bob, all of our children have done that. I think it was the freedom we gave them to say: "You know what? You've got to decide whether you want to invite us back in, and we'll come back in on *your* terms."

Bob: You think, in general, Barbara, that parents ought to take the responder role rather than the initiator role once marriage has taken place—let them initiate / you respond—don't you initiate and start offering advice.

Barbara: Yes; I would really agree with that, because then that gives them the freedom to make their own choices, and to create their own life, and to work out the marriage the

way they want to. I just think it keeps parents from intruding and coming across parental.

Bob: When your daughters or your daughters-in-law have invited you in and sought your counsel, what kinds of things have they asked you about?

Barbara: Well, I have had some conversations with Ashley, I think, from time to time, because she married first—she was about four years ahead of the boys.

After Samuel's wedding, we were still all together—the rest of the family—we hadn't all left and gone back to our respective homes. We were talking with Ben and Marsha Kay, who were engaged and were to be married six weeks later. Marsha Kay was so sweet and so kind and said to me, as we were just sitting around, having a conversation—she said, "You know, I'd really like for you to give me some tips on being a wife." I remember feeling so *honored*, first of all, because I really didn't know her that well. She was kind of the new kid on the block in the family, so to speak.

Bob: She's marrying Barbara Rainey's son—I mean, you've got a chance to get Barbara Rainey's advice! Every young woman wants that; don't they?!

Barbara: Well, not necessarily. [Laughter] I sure wasn't going to give it without being asked; and I didn't expect that, actually. I had no intention of giving her any advice—or Stephanie, either, for that matter—but Marsha Kay said: "You know, I'd really like to have you give me some tips on being a wife. I've never been a wife before, and I just would like for you to do that."

I remember—I just remember feeling such an incredible sense of honor that she would ask. I asked the other two girls—I asked Ashley and Stephanie both if they would be interested. They said they would—so I began to write them just on topics that I remember learning about in our years of marriage. I started out by writing things that I remember learning those first few years, and then I broadened it to things that I've continued to learn over the course of our marriage.

Bob: What's one of the things that you've shared with them?

Barbara: The first letter that I wrote—I just wrote some things that I remember learning those very early months of our marriage. I wrote about how I learned how to pray and how not to pray for my husband—that was the topic of the first letter. Would you like for me to read a piece of it?

Bob: I'd like to know—

Barbara: You would?

Bob: —what you learned about how to pray and how not to pray; yes.

Barbara: Okay.

Dennis: It was hard to pray for me because—[Laughter]

Barbara: There wasn't much that needed to be fixed; right?

Dennis: No! No! It was kind of boring there in the early years.

Barbara: Alright; now let me read then [Laughter] what *really* happened.

Bob: A truth check coming up here!

Dennis: “And now, the rest of the story.”

Barbara: Yes; well, here is one of the paragraphs that I wrote:

One of the very first lessons I learned, as a new wife, was how to pray and how *not* to pray for my husband. Even though we'd been good friends for three years before we married, I quickly discovered—just a few short months into the marriage—that there were some habits, tendencies, and weaknesses—[Laughter]

Dennis: Rewind the tape—hurry!

Bob: Habits, tendencies, and weaknesses—

Dennis: Bob, Bob, Bob—you don't have to repeat! The listeners heard it the first time, Bob.

Bob: Keep going—I'm loving this.

Dennis: We're calling Mary Ann next. [Laughter]

Barbara: Anyway:

There were some of those things—I won't repeat them—“in my husband that were not so pleasant. We were living in Boulder, Colorado, that first year of marriage. Neither of us had any friends, locally, much less a mentor.

Mentoring was not even a concept then.

I had a good model of faithfulness, and loyalty, and servanthood in my mother; but I have *no* idea if she prayed for my father. I only assumed that, as a Christian wife—and I was going to be the best

wife that ever lived—I should pray for my husband, and so I began a page for him in my quiet time notebook.

I don't remember the details now—only what I learned. Being conscientious, I began to record the things that I started seeing that I thought needed to be changed. I was sure God would agree with me. I added to my—

Dennis: Could we now have some music that begins to play over her voice? [Laughter]

Bob: No, no, no, no! We're enjoying this too much! [Laughter]

Dennis: How about *Amazing Grace*? [Laughter]

Barbara: There you go—that applies to me too. Let's see:

I was sure God would agree with me. I added to my list slowly, but it didn't take long for the list to grow to ten or more weaknesses. I felt it my duty to pray faithfully for Dennis and to do it every day. I was surprised, however, to discover that my praying for God to change all those areas only caused me to focus every day on what was wrong, in my opinion.

Bob: So you were meditating on your—

Barbara: —my husband—I was.

Bob: You're meditating on your husband's weaknesses.

Barbara: I was meditating on all these things every day, as I thought that was what I was supposed to do, as a wife—bring this before God.

Bob: Yes.

Barbara: I thought it was the right thing to do.

Dennis: [Hums *Amazing Grace*]

Bob: In the process of that meditation, did the Lord begin to tweak your thinking?

Barbara: He did. [Laughter]

Bob: Please, cut the music here. [Laughter] Give our listeners a little grace; will you? [Laughter]

Barbara: So the question was—

Bob: Over time, did the Lord begin to adjust your thinking?

Barbara: He did—and quickly I might add too. I'll pick it back up from the letter that I wrote to the girls—I wrote:

I felt it my duty to pray faithfully for Dennis. I was surprised, however, to discover that my praying for God to change all those things only caused me to focus every day on what was wrong. My prayers made me see him negatively, especially since God wasn't answering quickly. I didn't like the result. It may have been a spiritual exercise, but it wasn't fun.

I remember clearly one day deciding to quit praying my list. I told the Lord that it was His business to change my husband's life, and I wasn't going to remind Him anymore what He needed to work on. I said, "Lord, I give my husband to You, and I give You all these things that I think need to be changed. If You want to change any of those, it's up to You. I'm not praying about it anymore."

Perhaps it was that day or maybe a few days later, but my shift in focus made a big difference in my perspective. I didn't notice the things that were wrong nearly as often. They didn't bother me as much anymore and it was a great relief.

Dennis: Could we have the *Hallelujah* chorus instead of *Amazing Grace* now?
[Laughter]

Bob: Actually, the thing I want to know is: "Can you remember just one or two things from the list?" [Laughter]

Barbara: Actually, I can!

Bob: Yes?

Barbara: I just began to see how different we were.

Dennis: [Hums *Amazing Grace*]

Barbara: Here we go! [Laughter]

Bob: —full of grace.

Barbara: Because I was organized and more disciplined, and I thought he should be that way too. I didn't realize how good it was for me that we were so different.

18:00

I just was *very* immature and *very* young. I didn't know how to be a wife!

Bob: That's the reality for our kids when they get married. That's why it's hard for us, as parents, not to want to intervene and help them grow up.

Dennis: Man, I'm telling you.

Bob: But you're saying, "Don't go there!" unless *they* invite you.

Barbara: That's correct.

Dennis: I know of one pair of parents, who have an adult daughter and son-in-law, where the son-in-law and the daughter made some choices that were just unwise and didn't wait to get the counsel—went ahead and rushed ahead to make a major purchase. You can make some pretty colossal mistakes in your early months and years of marriage—like purchasing a house when you're overstepping your ability—and then you begin to find out you're way over-extended. Then you've got bigger issues like credit reports.

I know, in this pair of parents' lives—that was hard for them to sit back / to watch and to say nothing. I mean, if you're not invited in—and they are about to make a colossal mistake—sometimes it takes a mistake for the lesson to be learned.

The discipline for parents—I thought raising little ones was difficult—but truthfully, saying nothing many times was more difficult, as we've related to our adult children—who have done remarkably well—but saying nothing is far more difficult than what you used to say when you were raising little ones and teenagers.

Michelle: *FamilyLife Today* is brought to you by FamilyLife in Little Rock, Arkansas. And although FamilyLife is located in the United States of America, we understand that our cultures vary but the issues facing us are similar. We all have joys in life, we all struggle and we all want to love and be loved. And we want your family, your marriage and your relationships to succeed.

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I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our global broadcast manager Rhonda Street. I also want to thank our editor Larry Loraine. For Dennis Rainey and Bob Lepine, I'm Michelle Hill and I invite you to join us again tomorrow for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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