Bob: How you form a blended family can be tricky. How you bring together two financial backgrounds—two different bank accounts and balance sheets—that can be tricky too. Ron Deal says that’s a subject that a lot of couples never have a conversation about before they form a stepfamily.

Ron: I think a lot of couples don’t talk about this because they have this sense that it might bring up some conflict: “Let’s just not go there if we don’t have to. We’re happy today,”—you know?—“Why do we want to mess that up by talking about money?” Yet, if you don’t, I think you push off inevitable disagreements or potential conflicts.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Thursday, April 2nd. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You’ll find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. This is a subject that blended families ought not avoid. You need to talk about money and finances. You need to know how to talk about it, and you need to know what to talk about. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. Look who is in the studio with us; huh?!

Ann: This is a good day when Ron Deal steps in.

Bob: Ron is the—

Dave: As long as he doesn’t do the counseling thing with me; because last time, he put me on the couch and took me back into these dark caverns. [Laughter]

Ann: I might have secretly paid him to do that again. [Laughter]

Ron: Not today!

Bob: Ron, welcome to FamilyLife Today.

Ron: Thank you. It’s always good to be back.
Bob: Ron gives leadership to FamilyLife Blended®, which is a part of what we’re doing here. You’ve been doing this—is it a decade now?—close to it.

Ron: Oh man! I wish. [Laughter] We’re coming up on eight years.

Dave: Wow.

Bob: So, yes; it’s been a while.

Ron: Eight years, here, at FamilyLife®; that’s right.

Bob: Here is the cool thing—and I don’t know how many people recognize this—but there is a lot going on under your leadership. There’s an annual event for blended families called Blended & Blessed®, which is coming up here in just a few weeks; it’s April 25th—that’s a Saturday. You can find out more about Blended & Blessed when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com.

Dave: By the way, great event. Ann and I spoke at it last year; it’s just tremendous. Our church livestreamed it, and they loved it.

Bob: Yes; there is also an event you do in the fall called the Summit on Stepfamily Ministries, which is more for leaders—

Ron: Right.

Bob: —church leaders and folks who are doing blended family ministry.

Ron: Exactly; for lay counselors, or people leading a small group, or children’s ministry leaders, or senior pastors who want to know more about blended families.

Bob: Then you are writing and speaking. In fact, right now, you and Dr. Gary Chapman have been going around the country and speaking together on how blended families and love languages kind of mash up.

Ron: Yes.

Bob: That’s because of the new book that the two of you have written that is just now out.

We’re going to talk, today, about one of the big pot holes. In fact, I remember, Ron, when you and I first talked about this subject, it kind of blindsided me. It was one of those: “I never even stopped to think about that.”

Dave: —money? Bob, you don’t think about money?! [Laughter]
Bob: What I never thought about is all the complications—

Dave: Yes.

Bob: —that come in when a couple meet and fall in love—and they are either widows or there is a divorce—but there’s another family, or there are kids, or whatever. “Now, whose money is what?” That gets messy really quick.

Ron: It does get messy very quick. We quote, in the book, a firm in New York that reported that half of their disputed estate cases were between stepmothers and adult stepchildren.

Bob: Wow.

Ron: These are things that end up in court, and people battle over stuff.

Let me just give you a for instance; because you are absolutely right, Bob. I’ve been doing stepfamily ministry for about 27 years now, in one form or another; and I spent about 20 of those years avoiding this subject: (A) Because I’m not a money guy, and it’s not my field of expertise.

I really didn’t quite dive into enough to realize all the implications for families until Greg Pettys came along and said, “Hey, man, we really need to do this”; and he became one of the coauthors; and we brought in estate attorney, David Edwards. It’s kind of like the beginning of a bad joke [Laughter]: “What happens when a family therapist, a certified financial planner, and an estate attorney walk into a book?” [Laughter] I think it turned out well, but it was messy in the beginning. You know, I learned a ton about this.

Bob: Yes.

Ron: I realized all the things that I was missing. Here is just a for instance. Dave and Ann—Bob, you and Mary Ann—

Bob: Yes.

Ron: —I’m just going to make an assumption. The average couple, planning their estate today—probably, if one of you dies, you’re probably leaving it all to your spouse.

Bob: Yes.

Dave: Yes.

Ann: Correct.
Ron: What if I told you that: “If you did that, and then your spouse/your widow married somebody else,”—God forbid; you can’t imagine that, at this point in time; you guys are all pretty young—and so “What if: a few years—five years/ten years—after you passed away, your widow marries somebody else?”

Bob: And I think all of us would say: “If that was the situation, we’d want our spouse,—

Ron: Yes.

Bob: —if they met somebody and fell in love, we’d want them to marry.”

Ron: Right.

Dave: Not me, Bob. [Laughter] I want Ann only to have eyes for me. [Laughter]

Bob: Well, but if you are in the box in the ground, can’t she have eyes somewhere else at that point?

Dave: No!

Ann: But you’re thinking about your kids.

Dave: Yes; exactly. No; I’m joking. Of course, it’d be great.

Ron: You left everything to your spouse, knowing that they are going to provide for your kids—it’s all going to be left to them after they die—but in the meantime, lo and behold, they get married to somebody else. And then your widow dies. Do you realize, all of your assets just got left to their new spouse?

Dave: I don’t like this scenario.

Ron: —and their new spouse’s kids—

Dave: Wow!

Bob: Correct.

Dave: That’s true!

Ron: —not your kids.

Dave: Yes.
Ron: It happens that easily. In fact, there is a term—it’s called asset drift and unintended disinheriance—you’ve just inadvertently disinherited your kids, just because you didn’t think about it.

There are so many people that are already in that blended marriage—maybe, they were widowed; maybe, they were divorced—whatever the backstory is. They are already in that marriage, and they’ve not done any planning around this.

Bob: Right.

Ron: They are just assuming everything works out in the end, and that turns out to be one of the most dangerous assumptions people can make.

Bob: Well, take death out of the equation. Let’s say there is this blended family that has just formed; and it’s a couple in their 60s. He had three kids, and she had four kids. He was pretty well off, and the woman he married was—money was tight. Now, the three kids—his three kids, who were expecting, “When Dad dies, we’re going to inherit some good money.”

Ron: —“and the business,”—

Bob: Yes.

Ron: —or whatever is/whatever the story is.

Bob: Does this now get divvied up with her kids too?

Ron: Right!

Bob: Yes.

Ron: Is the rule that he leaves everything to her?—or wait a minute?

Ann: And imagine how disgruntled his kids are.

Bob: Exactly!

Ron: Exactly.

Dave: Well, we just sat at a dinner table with the disgruntled daughter; remember?

Ann: Yes.
Dave: I mean, she just/she just shared—and she is a wonderful, Christian woman—and she’s like: “This is really hard. The money we thought we were going to get is now going to our stepmom and her kids.”

Ron: You know what? Here is the immediate question: because sometimes the—on the surface, that sounds like, “Oh, she’s greedy,”—but wait a minute. Money is never about, really, about what’s above the surface; it’s often about what’s below the surface—so: “What could be going on in her heart?” Is this about: “I’m greedy”?—or is this about: “I don’t feel honored. I don’t feel cared for”?

Dave: Right.

Ron: “I’m beginning to think that Mom or Dad”—or whatever the scenario is—“is more thoughtful about their new spouse than about us, as their children. If there were ever a time back, when Mom and Dad divorced—when I was ten,” or “…twenty,” or “…four”—“and I felt uncared for then—this now reminds me that I’ve never quite felt cared for, all along.”

Ann: It’s almost like evidence.

Ron: It’s evidence; right. It’s raw, all of a sudden; then she is really disgruntled.

Dave: Money is always emotional.

Ron: It is.

Dave: There is no way to get around it; so now, you are really driving at some hurt emotions.

Bob: Well, and anytime we’ve had you here, we’ve talked about the relational tensions that happen in a marriage relationship and a stepfamily relationship. Those are very real. Take money completely off the table, there is still a whole bunch to deal with in terms of loyalty, and past baggage, and all of the things we’ve talked about before; but again, now, you throw money into the mix, and you’ve just added a nuclear device that I’m thinking, “This can take the best laid plans of a blended family and sabotage it.”

Ron: Let me tell you how passionate I’ve got about this. At our last Summit on Stepfamily Ministry, Greg, David, and I did what we call “Summit Immerse.” We did a three-hour workshop on the themes out of this book. I made this statement—and I’ve never said this before—but I’m saying it, again, now on the air: “I think pastors have a moral obligation to force”—if I could use that word—“couples, who are in blended situations, or dating/considering become a blended family—we have a moral obligation to ask them/to help them to ask these questions to plan, plan, plan,”—because this unintended disinheritance phenomenon is sad.
You know, we’re called to care for our children. What does 1 Timothy say?—“If a man doesn’t care for his family/if he is not stewarding and providing for”—well, if you just assume—“Honey, I love you; and you love me,” and with the best of intentions, you just assume it’s all going to work out—the odds are things are going to go awry at some point—maybe, after you’re gone; and your widow is trying to deal with your children/her stepchildren—that’s when it all hits. You really have to do some careful thought and planning around this.

**Bob:** Yes; there is a word for what you are describing, and the word is naïve.

**Ron:** Yes.

**Bob:** This issue is going to come up, either before you get married or after you get married. The question is: “Where is the best place for it to come up?” The answer is: “Before you get married”; because after you get married, you want these things settled so you can get on with the business of forming a new relationship.

**Ron:** You know, there are just so many interesting things that I learned. Did you know, for example, if you are a widow—and let’s say you’re under the age of 60—your spouse died young in life, and you’ve been getting social security benefits—spousal benefits. If you remarry before the age of 60, you lose your benefits; but if you remarry after the age of 60, you *keep* all of your prior benefits as well as gain possible—

**Bob:** —new benefits.

**Ron:** —future benefits.

Did you know that, if you are divorced from somebody, your former spouse can claim benefits/social security benefits on *you*, long after you’re divorced?

**Ann:** No; I had no idea.

**Ron:** Yes; you don’t actually have to even know about it; the government is not going to tell you about it. It doesn’t affect your social security benefits or any new spouse you might have—*their* potential benefits—but a former spouse can make that claim. Sometimes, people are leaving money on the table—

**Dave:** Yes.

**Ron:** —and didn’t even realize that they could do it.

**Dave:** So what are couples doing? Are they—I mean, I know a couple, going into their first marriage, *rarely* talk about money. Then they get in it and like, “Oh my goodness!” Are couples going into a blended family even thinking?
Ron: No; they are not! I think the assumption is: “I love you; you love me. We’re going to be a happy family. [Laughter] Somehow, it will all work out. I trust you to care for my kids; you trust me to care for yours.” I love those intentions; we want to build on those intentions in this book. *Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning* helps you put together what we call a “Togetherness Agreement”; so that, those intentions actually become fulfilled.

If you just assume that the money is going to flow to your spouse who, then, flow to your children after the stepparent passes away—or what have you—that’s not going to happen; but you can make it happen—that’s the really cool thing in all of this. I learned—

Dave: What is this Togetherness Agreement?

Ron: This Togetherness Agreement allows you to do that. It functions, basically, like a will. It basically says: “Hey, here is what we intend to do to provide care and provision for one another: for my spouse, for my children, before I die/after I die. We are going to have life insurance go here, and the estate is going to go here. The family business is going to go to this child, because they are invested in the family business; nobody else seems to care about that.”

In other words, it allows you to talk through and decide together—see, there is the togetherness piece—about how you are going to help money foster your family-ness, not inadvertently divide it up.

Dave: I’m guessing a low percentage of couples are doing this.

Ron: I don’t think anybody is doing it.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: Because we are just introducing the concept. And you know what? One of the big myths, I think, about money is—people say, “Well, I don’t have enough to…” “We don’t have an estate. I don’t own much; we don’t need to do this.” No; that’s wrong. You have something; and even if it’s Grandma’s dishes that got handed down to you, your kids are probably invested in where those end up. It’s not just about the amount of the value of those things; it is about the emotional connection, as Dave said earlier, that we have to those things, and what they mean to us, and how this demonstrates value of one another.

Bob: I hear the kinds of complications that we’ve been talking about here; and I am instantly overwhelmed to the point that I’m thinking, “Couples, who were happy and pursuing a life together, all of a sudden, they are not sure they can make this work because of the complications.”
Ron: Well, there is kind of a collective denial. You said, “Naïve,” earlier; and I’ll just say, “Denial.” I think a lot of couples don’t talk about this because they have this sense that it might bring up some conflict: “Well, let’s just not go there if we don’t have to. We’re happy today. Why would we want to mess that up by talking about money?” Yet, if you don’t, I think you push off inevitable disagreements or potential conflicts.

Again, we’ve talked before, on this program, about stepfamily relationship can bond and have great depth; but until they get there, they tend to be fairly fragile. It doesn’t take much for somebody to go: “Oh man! Okay; forget it. I’m not even going to try in this relationship anymore.” When you throw in a little conflict around money, all of a sudden, that can destroy a relationship that was somewhat fragile.

Bob, we’ve run into people that have literally said: “Alright, honey, this is our plan. This is how we are going to manage things. Let’s not tell the kids; I’ll let you tell my kids this was my decision after I’m gone.”

Bob: Oh man!

Dave: You’ve really had that.

Ron: Yes.

Dave: Wow!

Ron: It’s like, “Okay; what’s below the surface there?” This is a guy, who is afraid to set boundaries with his kids, to say: “Look, this is what’s happening…. This is what’s not happening…”—and then to deal with any potential response from their children. They’re throwing that off on their new spouse to—no!

Dave: And that gets at really a value about money. You say in your book, that most conflicts are not, really, about money; they are about the values underlying it. Get into that a little bit, because that’s really what going on there; right?

Ron: Yes.

Dave: It’s not just about dollars.

Ron: Can I just set the record straight; alright? Every time you hear, “Money is the number one cause of divorce,”—every time you hear that or see that in an article, it is not true.

Bob: Right.

Ron: Right?—it is not true. What is true is what’s underneath money; that’s what creates conflict; right?—because money makes a statement about what you value or
who you value; and how you handle money tells somebody whether you are selfish or not. It tells somebody whether you are really mindful of them or somebody else. “Do you really care for us?”—those are the statements money makes.

And blended families—then you have these added things of: “So do I really belong in this family?” “Who is your loyalty to? Is your ultimate loyalty to your children, or are you providing for me”, right? There are power issues in money—who gets to spend money/who doesn’t get to spend it, without asking permission. There are control issues in money; there are acceptance issues: “It seems to me more money is spent on your children than is spent on my children. Do you not accept my children?”—it’s what money means.

Dave: Yes.

Ron: That’s the stuff we fight about and argue about, and that’s what ruins relationships.

Bob: I have recommended your *Smart Stepfamily* book—I don’t know how many times—to how many people. In fact, almost anytime I meet couples, who are in a blended family, I say, “Have you read *The Smart Stepfamily*?—because that will help you in so many areas.”

If I had a number two book to recommend, I think it’s probably this new book; because of the level of complexity. Part of me says, “You’ve got to read this before you get remarried/before you form a blended family.” I’m wondering how this works with couples, who are two years in, and the blended family has already been formed. It’s like: “I’m not sure we want to crack open this book because now, all of a sudden, we may come up with a bunch of disagreements. [Laughter] Then we go through a tough season in our newly-formed blended marriage, which is already having some challenges.”

Ron: Yes; so let me talk about the below-the-surface stuff there, and then come back to the above-the-surface. Below the surface: the insecurity you feel around this subject ought to be telling you something. I’m not exactly sure what that means, but it is trying to tell you something; so listen to that part of you, that’s going, “I don’t want to go there.”

“Well, why not? What’s the fear? What’s the concern?” “If we go there, it might send the wrong message.” “Yes; you’re right. You need to communicate clearly about what it means and what it doesn’t mean—about what your decisions are going to indicate about your values.” Maybe, that insecurity is: “I’m not sure how others feel about me, or my place in the family.” So you’re really asking a family-merger question: “How far along have we come in this new blended family?”
Those are important; and we say in the book, “When you find those below-the-surface issues, you need to attend to those first.” That’s the first conversation—is: “Honey, do you feel insecure in our marriage?”

**Ann:** Ron, what happens if you, as a spouse, are thinking: “This is really important. I want to read this book together; I want to go through this,” and the other spouse has no interest?—they don’t want to talk about it. What should the one, who is wanting to do this—what’s their role? What should they do?

**Ron:** I want you to get curious about what’s below the surface—not critical: “Hey, come on! We got to get into…”—no; no; no. “So, tell me; what’s holding you up around this conversation? What concerns do you have about it?” Go below the surface; try to help them.

Sometimes, the other/your partner doesn’t even know what their insecurity or fear is. You gently ask and try to draw it up so that you, together, can deal with that first. Only when you get passed that, can you then go above the surface and go, “Alright; what’s a good plan for our money?” It’s kind of like, once you do the hard work of below-the-surface,—

**Dave:** Yes.

**Ron:**—the above-the-surface stuff just becomes a function of making some decisions/finding out the financial options that you have available. Just a quick sidebar: the financial world has some cool stuff that allows you to find creative solutions.

If I could just share one—this is my favorite—I have learned so much in the writing of this book. QTIP—have you ever heard of a QTIP?

**Ann:**—to clean my ears?

**Ron:** No! [Laughter] Qualified Terminal Interest Property Trust.

**Dave:** Oh, of course! Yes, we’ve heard of that.

**Ron:** Yes, yes, yes. Did you know?—back to that original question we started with: “What if my assets go to my widow and, then, to their widow and to their kids?” Did you know a QTIP is something you can establish that says, “When I die, all of the assets go to my spouse; when they die, these assets go to these children: this child, this child, this child, my stepchildren”? Everybody is provided for. From your grave, you can dictate where your assets go. It’s awesome; it provides for everybody. Everybody feels affirmed; everybody feels valued and cared for, and it’s all set up ahead of time. You don’t have to hope that it all works out.
Bob: Will an average financial planner or an average estate attorney be able—will they—

Ron: Yes.

Bob: —know these issues—

Ron: They will.

Bob: —for blended families?

Ron: I’m glad you asked. Yes; they will know what a QTIP is.

Bob: Yes.

Ron: They don’t necessarily know the below-the-surface issues. One of our goals in writing this book—and we’ve already started getting feedback from this—I had an estate attorney tell me, "I’ve spent 40 years helping people plan their estates, and I’ve never thought about the relational matters going on below the surface—

Bob: Wow.

Dave: Really?

Ron: —“until I read this book.” We’re helping financial planners and attorneys understand relationship dynamics. We’re helping couples understand both of those things; in particular, what’s above the surface in the financial world.

Bob: Here is kind of how I feel. I feel like I’m saying, “Everybody should have this book. It’s kind of like, ‘Everybody should have a pet snake at their house.’” [Laughter] I’m sorry; I don’t mean—you know what I’m saying?! It’s: “You need this book, and this is medicine,”—maybe, not a pet snake—“You need a shot; you need to go get an immunization,” and “Yes, it’s going to sting maybe for a little bit; but this is about your health, as a family, going forward.”

Ron: And if your mother is widowed, and she is seeing a guy—

Bob: Yes.

Ron: —they need this book!

Bob: You’re right.

Dave: Oh my goodness.
Ron: “You need this book.”

Dave: Yes.

Bob: Right.

Ron: If you are a pastor, a ministry leader/a marriage ministry leader, and you’re helping couples doing premarital counseling, you need this because it’s going to help you ask better questions and help them move into a space that they’re probably, naturally, not going to do.

Dave: And it’s also going to help you talk—

Ron: Yes.

Dave: —about this issue; because it’s one of those issues, like, “If I don’t talk about it, I don’t need to think about it.” This book will say, “Not only are we going to read it, we’re going to have communication; and it’s going to change everything”; right?

Ann: And bringing up underlying issues can be scary, but it can be a good thing that can bring healing.

Ron: Yes.

Bob: I’ve got a friend, who is a financial planner; and I’m going to send a copy of this to him.

Ron: I’ve got two brothers, and I’ve already sent them a copy. [Laughter]

Bob: I’m imagining that everybody he works with—he’s going to say, “We’ve all got to read this because this is what we’re dealing with, day to day, as we try to help people with their financial future.”

We’ve got copies, of course, of Ron’s book, The Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning, written with Greg Pettys and David Edwards. You can go to our website at FamilyLifeToday.com to get a copy, or you can call 1-800-FL-TODAY and order by phone. Again, the FamilyLife Today website is FamilyLifeToday.com; or call 1-800-358-6329—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.” Ask for Ron Deal’s book, The Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning, when you get in touch with us.

Many of you are aware that Ron has an event coming up in April, April 25. It’s the Blended & Blessed simulcast. This was originally set up as a live event in Houston but because of what’s going on with Covid-19, the coronavirus, it’s not going to be a live event. It is going to be a simulcast event which means that where ever you are, who
ever you are with, whether you’re gathering with a small group, again as long as everyone is healthy and you wash your hands and practice social distancing, it’s okay to get together in small groups or it may be just the two of you gathered together to take part in the *Blended & Blessed* simulcast that we are hosting on Saturday, April 25.

You can go to FamilyLifeToday.com for more information about the *Blended & Blessed* simulcast. How you can sign up and be a part of it. Again, go to familylifetoday.com and look for information about the *Blended & Blessed* simulcast.

Now, tomorrow, we’re going to continue our conversation with Ron Deal about financial issues in blended families. This is important stuff. And if you know somebody, who is in a blended family, encourage them to tune in tomorrow or to go to FamilyLifeToday.com and get the podcast versions of these programs so that they can listen. Pass this on to somebody, who is in a blended family. I think they’ll benefit from that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with some help today from our friend, Mark Ramey. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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