

## LEAVING YOUR PARENTS TO CLEAVE WITH YOUR SPOUSE

(Edited from a radio broadcast given by Dennis Rainey on Family Life Today)

The following transcripts are edited from a radio broadcast given with Dennis Rainey (and Bob Lepine) in August of 2004. The following is a shortened version of two days of an excellent eight day radio series entitled, "Becoming One: God's Blueprints for Marriage." We'll give you more details at the end of this article on how you can obtain the rest of the transcripts (or obtain the tapes or CD's) of the entire series. But for now we'll begin the first day with the foundational scripture:

**For this cause, a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh, and the man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed.** (Genesis 2:24-25)

**Dennis Rainey:** Today we want to look at the whole aspect of how you leave father and mother to establish this new union. And at the outset I want to say there is a lot of emotionally deep water around this subject of leaving your father and mother to establish a new marriage relationship.

**Bob Lepine:** I was reading recently in Dr. Dan Allender's book, "Intimate Allies," and he made the statement that, in his experience, he could trace 90% of marital discord back to a failure to leave.

**Dennis:** And most couples don't think they've failed to leave, yet if they could see what is trailing behind them as they walk out the church, they'd see "apron strings" still tied to a man and a woman by their parents; by people who love them, who care about them, but who simply don't know how to let them leave. And it's awkward because there is a new union formed there, a new relationship that is an entity, and it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be a couple who are one, who are in the process of forging a marriage relationship.

I was reading in Tim Kimmel's book, "Powerful Personalities," describing different personality types and how different people try to control others through aggressive or passive behavior and how we can manipulate each other. A young couple that is really not prepared properly to establish this new marriage relationship — if they're not careful, will be controlled by either his parents or her parents or find themselves in between two sets of parents trying to establish this relationship. The word "leave" from the biblical text means to "forsake dependence upon." It means to turn your allegiance away from your parents toward your spouse.

We do that in such a way that honors our parents but that sends a clear signal that this is a new relationship that must be established. Sometimes parents don't realize that this command in Genesis, chapter 2, verse 24 is as much a command to the parents as it is to the couple who are getting married. It's the wise parents that can understand the dynamics that a young couple is under as they try to forge the identity of a new marriage in the midst of two competing families.

**Bob:** It's one thing for parents to understand what they're supposed to do, it's another thing for parents to process that emotionally and make that switch.

**Dennis:** It's hard to turn your back on the emotional giving, sharing, and development that you've poured into this daughter or this son's life to encourage them to leave. It doesn't mean

you lose the relationship, though. It means, in essence, you get one back that's different, that has different parameters. You shouldn't be controlling them as a young adult, anyway.

A lot of parents need to realize you need to let your son or daughter grow up. Let them become a mature adult and relate to them more as a peer and less as a child. But some of our parents simply can't get beyond that because, frankly, in some situations, we represent the only real living relationship that our parents have. They don't have a vital marriage, and the only real relationships they have are with their children, and they simply can't or won't allow them to leave.

**Bob:** You said that most of us would think that we have left, and we may not have really left. You defined leaving as "forsaking dependence upon." How can I run a test to see whether I've done the leaving that I'm supposed to have done?

**Dennis:** There are three areas you can run a test on to see how you've done in leaving your father and mother. The first one is emotional — have you left your parents' emotional control of your life? Are you still looking to them for support, for encouragement, and for their approval?

I remember, in my immaturity again as a young man, simply sharing with my mom a mistake that Barbara had made in our marriage. It was a minor mistake. Barbara had hurt me, but I shared it with my mom, and it was as though I had shared this grievous error, because my mother came running over to me. And although she didn't say these words verbally, what I felt was, "I knew that she couldn't be the woman that you really needed as my son."

**Bob:** "She wouldn't take care of you the way I have."

**Dennis:** Yeah, that was what she was essentially saying and, obviously, my mom had practice. I was almost 25 years old, so she had 24 years practice caring for me as her son. But what she was doing was rushing in to care for me, and in future conversations with my mom, the mistake that Barbara made would be brought up by her. I learned a very valuable lesson — be very careful, as a couple, of what you share with your parents of how your spouse has disappointed you or hurt you. Your parents don't have near the grace to give your spouse that you have. You're their son or their daughter that they will naturally move to protect. They've been trained to do that for years.

I don't condemn my mom for her protective instincts. I just recognize that they're there. But I realized at that point I couldn't share those disappointments with my mom. It would simply play to a weakness in her life, and set Barbara up to be a failure in my mom's eyes.

**Bob:** So you're saying that in this idea of leaving emotionally, we've got to be on guard against a natural tendency our parents will have to continue to try to be our parents.

**Dennis:** Yes, and if your parents are trying to manipulate you emotionally, what you have to do is ask your spouse to help you get beyond this. Build some boundaries around your lives, around the holidays, determine how long you're going to go and when you're going to go and whose house you're going to go to for that first Christmas or that second Christmas or successive Christmases. Use the marriage relationship that God has given you to protect one another from being manipulated or being taken advantage of or from emotionally being clobbered by parents.

I think your spouse ought to be that person you cleave to and depend upon to really help you get free of your parents and establish your own identity as a couple.

**Bob:** Okay, we have to see if we have left emotionally — are there other areas?

**Dennis:** I think the financial area is one where parents can try to exert power or control over us. I remember early in our marriage, I had invested some money in a small land deal. It was a small amount of money for me, as a single man, but it was an investment. It turned over and sold real quickly, and I made a nice little profit. So I thought, "Hey, I think I'll put the profits in another investment." So after we had gotten married, Barbara and I together decided we'd invest in a second investment. And just as the first investment had been really good, this investment was equally bad — and we lost it all.

At that point, the temptation was to call daddy. Now, I use the word "daddy" there specifically because it wasn't calling "Dad." It would be calling "Daddy." For me this situation became an opportunity to squarely face my obligations as a young man with a wife. If I'd made a dumb choice and a bad investment I needed to bear the loss that came with that.

In a very unusual way, I feel like that choice to take my losses and not run home to my dad to bail us out as a couple was a very important step in becoming financially independent and becoming responsible as a man, to provide for my wife and be responsible for my own financial decisions. Now, I'm not saying it would be wrong to ask parents to help you out in a situation.

It turned out, later on, that my dad ended up giving us some money to help us with a down payment on our first home. But that felt different, getting that down payment, than what I would have felt if I had gone home to dad and asked him to bail us out of a difficult situation. I think what happens today with many young couples is they're trying to live on a higher level than they ought to be living. They're going home to mom or dad to bail them out of a situation. And it's creating a dependence upon parents, because where money goes, there can be — not every time— but there can be control, manipulation, and there can be a payback.

It's interesting that when my dad did help us with the house, later on, I felt absolutely no control by him or by my mom, even though they did help us establish that first home. Here is the wisdom for parents, who are listening — if you do help your kids financially, make sure you're doing it in such a way that it doesn't exert control or influence, and it really divides this couple who were meant to be cleaving toward one another.

**Bob:** How can I tell whether an offer of financial help from parents is coming with strings attached or not?

**Dennis:** I'd look at the track record of the parents. Do they have a track record of using other things in your life to control you, manipulate you, or seek power over you? If they have, I wouldn't accept money.

**Bob:** But if we're looking at the down payment on a house, and really want to be in the house.

**Dennis:** I'm telling you, there is no house worth the emotional cost that you're going to have to pay. It really isn't worth it. Leaving and cleaving needs to be away from your parents— cleaving to your spouse. If you allow money to control you, you're going to be pulled back when you need to be stepping forward towards your spouse.

**Bob:** Okay. We've talked about emotionally leaving, we've talked about financially leaving —

is there another area?

**Dennis:** Yes, decision-making, and this could include the spiritual dimension of life as well—just getting advice from parents. Parents need to give advice, and I think we need to go back to them for counsel and for wisdom, but the decision needs to be yours as a couple. You need to share the weight of that decision praying together and making your decision as a couple.

That doesn't mean you wouldn't do what they say, necessarily. It just means that you can't give them power over your lives at that point. Illustration in point — I know a grown man who is stuck in a spiritually dead church. He takes his entire family there every Sunday. He has been going there for 15 years with his kids. His kids are now teenagers. Just down the road there is a church that preaches the word of God and it's got a great youth group. Do you know who is really controlling this decision — both sets of parents.

Both of those parents go to that church, and they are keeping them in this liberal church, and this guy will not assume the responsibility that he has to lead his family spiritually by taking them to a place where they'll be nurtured; where they will receive spiritual encouragement to grow. And you know what? It's going to cost him, and it's going to cost him big time in his family as his children move on to maturity.

**Bob:** You talk a lot about the concept of honoring our parents. I'm sure for this man the idea of moving on to another church feels like it would be bringing great dishonor on both sets of parents.

**Dennis:** This is taking place in a small community, so the pressure is intense. The whole town would know if this man moved his family from that church. But, at that point, you've got to look at that man and say, "Do what's spiritually best for your wife and your family." In this particular situation, everyone in his family wants to make the move to the other church, but he's afraid of what it will cost him. He needs to be a man of conviction. He needs to lead his family spiritually.

**Bob:** It might help if he would read Tim Kimmel's book on how to deal with powerful personalities, because it sounds like that's one of the things that's going on here. He's got parents who are working to subtly control him in this situation.

In fact, Dr. Dan Allender's book, "Intimate Allies," would be another great resource for him, because in that book Dan talks about the importance of leaving father and mother and about some of the subtle tendencies there can be on the part of parents to continue to try to control us, even after we're married.

**Dennis:** I've got three quick thoughts for you as you evaluate as a couple what you've done in leaving your father and mother.

First of all, I'd encourage you to discuss, as a couple, have you left? Each of you — have you left emotionally, financially, and for direction or decision-making? Secondly, if you've got some problems there, I'd encourage you to pray together, as a couple, for a solution. And, third, honor your parents but take action. Set a course for your marriage and take control of the future by making some decisions that will create health and spiritual vitality in your marriage.

**Bob:** We'll talk more tomorrow about what some of those steps might be specifically, and I hope our listeners can join us for that.

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## LEAVING —Broadcast Date: 08/26/04

**Bob:** The Bible says when a man and a woman are getting married, they are to leave father and mother. But what happens if Mom and Dad don't want you to leave?

**Dennis:** You can't make that decision for your parents. You can't force them to let you leave. All you can do is leave. Leave your need for approval from them and turn to your spouse and let that person be the one that you cleave to and commit to, to experience approval and appreciation and encouragement that God intended in the marriage relationship.

Many times I've used the illustration of the husband having a set of blueprints and the wife having a set of blueprints, and the problem when their blueprints only overlap at points. If a husband and a wife both have the same set of blueprints, and they're both coming at their marriage relationship from the Scripture, they're going to be building their marriage as God designed it. Genesis, chapter 2 gives us the panoramic view of the marriage relationship from God's perspective. In verses 24 and 25 He says, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed."

I believe virtually every marital problem can be traced to a failure to leave, a failure to cleave, or a failure to really cultivate that oneness of flesh. If we really understand these blueprints in the Book of Genesis, it will help us, as a couple, have our marriage set in the right direction.

**Bob:** Couples will often say, "Our problem is" — and then they'll go on to list whatever the issue that they're dealing with is. I oftentimes say, "No, your symptom is communication," or your symptom is finances. I point them back to Genesis and say, "Your problem is either a failure to leave, a failure to cleave, or a failure to really establish the oneness in a marriage relationship."

**Dennis:** That's right, and in Genesis, chapter 2, verse 24, it talks about a cause. God wants a man and a woman to become one. It's the marriage relationship. That's the cause that causes him to leave his father and his mother. The word "leave" here means to "forsake dependence upon." It means that we no longer look to our parents for approval, for support, or for encouragement. We leave one sphere of influence and move to another sphere of influence.

**Bob:** Let's assume that some of our listeners are headed toward the altar this year. What can they be doing now to prepare to leave?

**Dennis:** I think they are in an enviable position of being able to establish the leaving to occur in the right way. They can begin to spend time with their parents and let them know that although they're leaving them to establish this new union, they still are going to be their son or daughter, and they want a relationship. But they can send signals to the parents to let them know that their allegiance is switching, that they're going to be committed to this new person that they are making a covenant with in the marriage ceremony.

Parents need their sons and daughters to help them in this process. It's difficult. Emotionally, parents don't want to give up the investment that's taken place over 18 or more years. It's the wise person who can understand those dynamics and maybe even talk about it with their mom or dad. Let them know that you know it may be a struggle.

It may be that the son or daughter is the only real relationship they have. They may not have

any other relationships. They may be in a dead marriage. They may not be alive spiritually. They may not be plugged into a good church where they have their relationship needs met by other Christians. And so for them to say goodbye to a son or daughter who is getting married, is to cut themselves off from a living hope. It's at that point that we need to give our parents a gift of compassion. It's the gift of looking at your parents through the eyes of Christ. How can I so minister to them and encourage them that it will make this process of leaving palatable for all concerned?

**Bob:** You're saying that a young man or a young woman who is headed toward marriage would be wise to invest some time and emotional effort in beginning to prepare his parents for the idea that he's leaving. That will help establish his marriage relationship in the early days?

**Dennis:** No question about it. If a young man has the wisdom to prepare his parents he will go a long way toward establishing a freedom and ability to establish a new marriage relationship when it occurs. In fact, if he will use these days leading up to the marriage ceremony, at the point when the couple do cleave, there will be a lot less problems in the first years of marriage as they decide where to go over the holidays and whose parents to go visit and how much time to spend at which parents' house on vacation. And it will also help when parents overstep their bounds, or they're moving back into control. If there is the relationship there, and it's been established, then there can be the discussion about these matters without it becoming some kind of polarization.

**Bob:** Let's assume that the wedding has already taken place, and it's 5 years into the marriage, and couples are beginning to look at one another and saying, "Is this an issue for us? Maybe we haven't done a good job of establishing our leaving from our parents."

**Dennis:** I think the process really begins when you realize that you haven't left, and you haven't done it properly. If you recognize that that's true, then at that point you can begin to take some steps that will breathe some health into your own marriage but also into your relationship with your parents.

**Bob:** And you'd recognize that by seeing that you are either emotionally dependent or financially dependent or still dependent in your decision-making on your mom or your dad?

**Dennis:** Yes, there are certain parents who are manipulators, who are controllers, and they have such a pattern of controlling that they simply can't allow their child to leave. I was reading in Tim Kimmel's book, "Powerful Personalities," about three kinds of personality types. One is the aggressive controlling type; a second kind is a passive manipulator, and a third one is a combination of the two - a passive-aggressive controller. Tim really does a great job of explaining how you can have your life controlled by another person and how you can break free from that control.

The first step in dealing with this as a married couple is beginning by honoring your parents. I think any leaving of your parents, whether it be the wedding ceremony for a couple who is getting married where you would honor the parents during the ceremony, or whether it be a married couple who have been married five years, 10 years, or more, there are ways to leave your mother and father and still bring honor to them.

Let me read a portion from a story about a couple who recognized they had not fully left their parents and some steps they took to lead their parents but also do it within the context of honor.

"Dan and Rebecca had been married for more than 10 years before they wrote a tribute to honor Dan's parents. Dan's parents were controllers. They expected Dan and Rebecca to attend all family functions, even if it meant missing Rebecca's family gatherings at Christmas. Dan couldn't say no to his parents. After years of struggling, Dan and Rebecca concluded that they must do something to honor their parents and establish that Dan's leaving had occurred.

They had a plaque made at a local trophy store. Engraved on the plaque were the words of affirmation for all Dan's parents had done for him — a recognition that they had given to his life so that he could leave and cleave to his wife Rebecca. Dan used the opportunity of a tribute to discuss and carefully establish with his parents some boundaries that would prevent their control in the future. And it worked."

You see what happened here? They couldn't let him leave, so *he* left. And by writing a tribute, he did it with such honor, that it formalized the process of him leaving. And I recall in the letter how they had a time of interaction with them talking about the need for Dan to be able to cleave to his wife and meet some of her family's needs as well.

The issue here is, as you return home with honor, you can use that opportunity to formalize the leaving that should have occurred at the wedding ceremony.

**Bob:** I'm sure some folks think it worked for Dan and Rebecca, I'm not sure it will work for me. Is there a guarantee on this idea?

**Dennis:** No, because parents are human, and the emotional bond with children is so powerful that you can't make that decision for your parents. You can't force them to let you leave. All you can do is leave. Leave your need for approval from them and turn to your spouse and let that person be the one that you cleave to and commit to experience that approval and appreciation and encouragement that God intended in the marriage relationship.

**Bob:** And if we try to do that without doing it in the context of honor, we send a message to our parents or our in-laws that we haven't really grown up yet. So the first step for a couple is to make sure they're leaving in the context of honor. What's next?

**Dennis:** If you're married to a spouse who gets controlled by his or her parents, then what you've got to do is step in there to protect them and really preserve their own individual integrity as they go back home. In other words, let's say you take your wife home, and she has a mom who's manipulative, and you watch this begin to occur. Within the context of honor, I think there are ways to step in there, put your arm around your wife, and perhaps pull her out of situations that may be inflammatory, where she may be losing it emotionally; take a walk, find opportunities to build space in the schedule so that perspective can be regained and so that the parents do not maintain control over their son or over their daughter. What you've got to do is take the action needed to really protect and just be a guardian of your spouse without putting your spouse's parents down or dishonoring them.

**Bob:** That takes some courage, doesn't it?

**Dennis:** It really does; sometimes tough situations demand dramatic measures and, as a man or as a wife, you may need to move in there and protect your spouse or confront a situation and protect the one that you're committed to. And here is a real caution — be careful of turning against your spouse in front of your parents and siding with your parents against your spouse. That can create a feeling of disloyalty and of being a failure to leave

and cleave to your spouse. What your spouse needs in those situations is to be publicly reaffirmed. And what I'd suggest, as a couple, is to talk about these issues, pray about them, and then ask the Lord what kind of steps need to be taken and go back home with an offensive game plan in place so that if a certain circumstance continues to occur, you know exactly what you're going to do ahead of time.

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The above transcripts are a portion of two days' worth of broadcasts which came from an eight day series entitled "Becoming One: God's Blueprints for Marriage" with Dennis Rainey, co-hosted by Bob Lepine produced by Family Life Today. You will want to read the rest of it on their web site. The following two days after these broadcast days focused on "Cleaving to Your Spouse" which is something worth getting ahold of. This is a marvelous series to listen to, or read from the transcripts, or purchase. It can be obtained through the ministry of Family Life Today by visiting their web site at [www.familylife.com](http://www.familylife.com).

In order to do that you go to their web site and on their Home page go down to the lower right side and click on "Past Broadcasts". You then select the Program by clicking on the arrow and selecting "Family Life Today". In the date click on the arrow and select the month of "August" then enter the date "25" and the year "2004". You then will be given the choices for the titles of the individual titles within the series, "Becoming One: God's Blueprints for Marriage". Whichever one you select will bring up choices to either listen to the broadcast, purchase the cassette or CD, or read the Transcript. The choice is up to you.

We have to say that we are so impressed with the ministry of Family Life Today that they will give so many choices to minister to those who visit their web site for help—many of them being free. That is truly a ministry because the broadcast along with the web site and other ways in which they minister is expensive to make available. We thank God for this ministry and pray God's people will help them financially so they can continue to offer them to those of us who need the help to make our marriages and families healthy and strong in the Lord.