



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Empty Nest – Part 4

**Guest(s):** Judy Berry and Panel

**Air Date:** April 20, 2023

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- Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson, and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.
- Roger Marsh: The big day has arrived. Your youngest child is about to leave the nest and start his or her life as an adult. You and your spouse start making plans for this exciting new chapter of your lives, but something is holding you back. And this feeling is far more common for empty nesters than you might think. Welcome to Family Talk, with your host, psychologist and best-selling author, Dr. James Dobson. I'm Roger Marsh. Today is the conclusion of a classic four-part series Dr. Dobson recorded many years ago with a group of four thoughtful and knowledgeable women discussing the topic of the empty nest. Here now is Dr. James Dobson on today's edition of Family Talk.
- Dr. James Dobson: All right, folks. I'm going to press you a little bit. In fact, I'm going to get downright nosy and I'm going to ask you a difficult question. How do you handle guilt or regret over failure? As you look back, do you see things that you didn't do right? And how big a factor is that in your life now?
- Sally Marston: I think that the secret to that for me is not letting it heap up in great mounds. I make mistakes. Can you believe that? I'm known to do it.
- Dr. James Dobson: Honestly? Let's get them down here.
- Sally Marston: What's great about it though, is that in Christ, there's a place to be forgiven it. It's a beautiful word, forgiven, and we make mistakes all the time. With the best of motives, we can make mistakes. And I think transparency, as you're raising your kids, is the secret, not getting to that last final day and then, "Oh, there was so much I did wrong." They know. We're not trying to model perfection to our kids. We're modeling forgiveness and a love relationship with the Lord. And love does wonderful things.
- Dr. James Dobson: So you have been able to forgive yourself.
- Sally Marston: Right.

Dr. James Dobson: And sometimes I think the Lord can forgive us a whole lot quicker and easier than we forgive ourselves.

Beth Brown: Yeah. And sometimes, my friends and my family have helped me to do that. My husband's real quick to say, "Don't talk about yourself that way. Let that one go." And that's very helpful to me, because when I do make a mistake, it's, "Oh, how could I have been so stupid?" That kind of a bad word that I would never use toward my kids, would use it toward myself. And my husband will say, "Don't use that. You're not a stupid person." You're right. And so, this constant daily saying, "I blew it with the kids." Going to the children and saying, "I messed up there and I'm really sorry."

"That's okay, mom. We forgive you." Making it right as it goes, you don't get to finally the end of high school and say, "Well, there's a number of things we need to clear the air about," because the relationship has-

Dr. James Dobson: You cleared it all along.

Judy Berry: That's right.

Sally Marston: Mm-hmm.

Judy Berry: I agree.

Beth Brown: The empty nest really starts on the day they're born, if you think about it. That's a preparation for that day, and all these issues are a lifespan accounting.

Dr. James Dobson: Would you agree that the empty nest syndrome is likely to be more difficult when you do have a lot of regret and guilt?

Sally Marston: Yes. Oh, yes.

Judy Berry: Oh, absolutely. Yes. Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: How do you deal with it?

Sally Marston: Well, I looked back on some of my parenting and really have gone through some periods of real guilt and saying, if I had only, and why didn't I do it this way? I came to know the Lord 12 years ago, so our children were about third grade and fifth grade at that time. And I thank the Lord that he came into my life at that time. I sure wish that it had happened a lot earlier, but those were real important years with the children. And so I had the love of God at that time, but I still look back and made so many mistakes. So now, I take that to prayer, I take it to the Lord, and I say, "God, help me deal with that," and then in turn praying for my children for that emotional and spiritual healing in their lives for any damage that maybe we may have done as parents to their ego and to their self-esteem.

Dr. James Dobson: Are you able to do that emotionally, Sally?

Sally Marston: I believe so. The Lord has really helped me with that, and continues to as I get flashbacks in my mind of a circumstance or a situation or how we disciplined or didn't discipline. And so it still comes, but the Lord's there to meet us when we come to Him and can take that to Him.

Dr. James Dobson: Parenthood is a guilty affair, isn't it?

Sally Marston: It is.

Dr. James Dobson: It's almost impossible to do it without guilt because we are imperfect, human beings.

Judy Berry: Aren't you the one that said in one of your books, when the overall tone of the home is positive, the children will remember that and a lot of the negative things will be forgotten.

Dr. James Dobson: What I actually said, Judy, and how nice of you to remember, because I don't remember which book it was in.

Judy Berry: I remember lots of other things too.

Dr. James Dobson: I think I said that we are allowed some mistakes. We don't have to do it perfectly, no one ever does, as long as the overall tone is somewhere near the right note, I think is what I said.

Judy Berry: Okay. Well, I picked up on that and that has been the saving grace with me because I, along with you, Beth, I really relate to this business of saying I'm sorry. And we as in our family have tried to do that whenever there's been an occasion where we did feel sorry. I have said many times to my children, I'm sorry. I wish I had have done something different," or "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that." I identified, Sonya, with what you said about seeing the baby without the hat. That would be me. I would say, "Where's his hat?" And then I would say, "I'm sorry, I had no right to say that." but I think that the ability to say I'm sorry at any point, and then to say I love you... I think one of the things that was the hardest for me when the kids were gone is that I couldn't go to their bedroom door and say at night before I went to bed, "I love you," because they weren't there to hear it.

Dr. James Dobson: You said it every night for all those years.

Judy Berry: I said it every night for all those years and they grew accustomed to hearing that. And I'm just glad that I have allowed the children to see me as I am. I have not tried to hide my feelings from them. So I can do about anything and they understand. And whether they understand, they accept it. And I can say, "I'm sorry," but those three words, I love you, can cover a multitude of mistakes.

Beth Brown: And I can just guess, Judy, that every night is these college kids not off to sleep in the dorm, they're hearing I love you.

Dr. James Dobson: They can hear it.

Beth Brown: Because there's a whole memory history.

Dr. James Dobson: You don't have to say it anymore. That goes in their brain.

Judy Berry: And the little girl that my son loves and that I do believe God has sent to him, I have been able to say to her, "I love you," and I do love her and I pray for them every day that God will continue to work in their lives and-

Dr. James Dobson: You're going to be a good mother-in-law, Judy. And in fact, when you are a mother-in-law, we'll bring you here with three other mother-in-laws and play a tape of today.

Judy Berry: There's just one other thing too. I don't want to deviate from the subject, but I think that we mothers who talk about the empty nest dare not forget what our husbands are feeling because Paul made a statement to me not too long ago and I was so wrapped up in my own feelings of hurt, and he has been the greatest comforter to me through the years. And as I looked at him, there were tears. And he said, "Judy, I hurt too," and it sort of took me back and I thought, now, why did that take me back? He's a sensitive man. And I think because society allows us women to cry and express everything and society tells the men to hold it all back, we need to think about what the fathers are feeling a little more.

Dr. James Dobson: He may not be talking about it, but he's feeling it the same way.

Sonya Wark: Not too long ago, well, I think with both Bob and I, we've had to go to each one of our children or felt we had to go to each one of our children and say we were sorry for particular instances that we felt very badly about, and it's really made the bond even warmer and even better.

Dr. James Dobson: They accepted it.

Sonya Wark: Yeah. I know that with my oldest son, sometimes I can't imagine how I could have been so insensitive or unaware of something that he was going through or something that I didn't... It just didn't register with me. And I've said, "I'm really sorry and I hope you can forgive me." Just a silly little example, since our youngest daughter has been in Spokane in college, I have sent her a care package every week of cookies or muffins or whatever, something.

Beth Brown: Would you like my address?

Sonya Wark: The two boys that went to college here, Rob went to Pomona and David went to Irvine, and it never ended my head to send them a package. I don't know why. I guess because Sandy's the kind of person that says, "Hey, mommy, you're going to send me a package?" And all I need to... "Yeah, fine. If you just tell me what you want, I'll try and do it."

Dr. James Dobson: Were they aware of that?

Sonya Wark: I don't know whether they were or not. I think they probably were, but they evidently didn't feel they could or didn't know how to say, "How about sending me a package?" I would've just loved it so much if they had. And that's the kind of guilt that I have. Why didn't I think of it myself? I don't know why.

Dr. James Dobson: It shows the individual differences in temperament. If I was your son, I would've made sure you got that message.

Sally Marston: Right.

Sonya Wark: Well, maybe it did cross their mind, but I suppose I didn't think of it because they're still in town, more or less.

Dr. James Dobson: Sunny, if that's your biggest error-

Sonya Wark: Oh dear. No, that's not the biggest...

Dr. James Dobson: Again, the four of you have expressed your answers to this question about guilt and regret as a problem that has been resolved, as something that you had to deal with, but you gave it to the Lord. I'm glad that's true for you. There are an awful lot of people listening that that's not true for them.

Beth Brown: And it may not be true at the empty nest moment. The hope we have is that it may be a future resolution. Your kids may all be gone with some unresolved feelings from those child raising years that maybe 10 years away will then come back and be resolved. We've all heard those stories, that you have to sort of come out and maybe even become a parent yourself to go back and work out with mom and dad, those feelings.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, in those 10 years, will you come back and tell us how you've done?

Sally Marston: How it turned out? Sure.

Dr. James Dobson: We'll have a reunion of this group down the road someplace. That would really be a pleasure. Let's kind of go around the circle in conclusion here and give some advice or just your concluding thoughts to mothers of 12, 13, 14 year olds who are three or four years away from this empty nest. Anything that you would say to her, or to him, to the father as well, about what is coming and how to get ready for it? Words of wisdom. Beth, we'll start with you.

Beth Brown: Big words of wisdom. I think that at that stage, you should, and even if your children are younger, allow them times to be away from you, small moments of time to be... Release them over the years to more and more separateness. That's your final goal. So that at the end of this time period, you have a celebration to say, "We've done it. We've made it." So allow some time for the children to separate from you through those child raising years if it's overnight or away on a weekend trip, it's kind of-

Dr. James Dobson: I made the point that you began releasing at the moment of birth.

Beth Brown: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: When the child holds his own bottle, you have been released of that responsibility.

Beth Brown: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: You've transferred that from yourself to him. When he walks, you don't have to carry him everywhere. You have to chase him, but you don't have to carry him everywhere from that point on. And so really, all of childhood is preparation for that moment of release. And I remember when I was a junior in high school, my father was a minister, and he was invited to speak for two weeks at a church someplace. And my mother left me at home alone for two weeks with the car. I was a junior in high school. She allowed me to have friends to come over and stay with me, and I had different friends that rotated in and out through the course of those two weeks.

And I remembered thinking at the time that that was pretty risky. I knew that I was immature. I was 17 years of age. Here, she gave me a car and I had run of the house and I was free for that period of time. And after I grew up, I asked her why she did that. I sat down with her one day and I said, "Mom, why in the world did you turn that car over to me and allow me to have the house? I could have torn the house up. I could have burned it down. I could have had parties. I could have done all kinds of things." And she said, "It's because I knew that a year later you were going to be at way at college and totally out from under my authority and responsibility." And in fact, I came to California to college. She knew I was going to do that, so I would've been a couple of thousand miles from her.

And she said, "I wanted to give you some experience in that independence." And she said, first of all, I knew I could trust you." She said, "I took a gamble, but I knew I could trust you." So I wouldn't recommend this for every 17 year old. Not all of them could handle it, but she knew that I could. And she was giving me an opportunity to do just what you're saying, Beth, to feel what it was like to be out from under her authority.

Beth Brown: So she knew she could trust you, and then you had a sense of personal autonomy.

Dr. James Dobson: I didn't even know that she could trust me. I wondered if she could.

Beth Brown: But when it was all over you said, "I did it."

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, that's right.

Beth Brown: And that's what the kids experience.

Dr. James Dobson: I grew through it.

Beth Brown: Right.

Dr. James Dobson: That's right. That's good advice. Judy?

Judy Berry: I would say accentuate the positive. For every negative thing you see in your child, if you really stop and think about it, I bet you can count 10 things that are positive. And if a child... And this begins way, way young when they're very little, for them to have that sense that mom and dad trust them. I don't know what comes first, if they're trustworthy and you trust them or you trust them and they're trustworthy, but I just have a very strong belief in the fact that if from the very early stages you praise your children for the things they do, they feel like "Mom and dad, trust me, and I don't want to break that trust." Now, I know that that is not a pet answer and that is not always the case, but generally speaking, that's-

Dr. James Dobson: You act like that even if it's not entirely true.

Judy Berry: That's right. And accentuate the positive and let the kids know. Praise them a lot. The world is there to tear them down. And when they're at their lowest point, they ought to be able to feel like, "When I go home, whether my folks understand or not, they'll accept, and I can go home and I can be sheltered there."

Dr. James Dobson: So what you're really saying is you want to build those friendships.

Judy Berry: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: So for the rest of your life, you are friends with one another after the parenting years over.

Judy Berry: That's right. That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: Sunny, how about you?

Sonya Wark: I would say to respect each child as an individual and to be aware of their temperament and their talents, and to not be so insecure that if they don't agree with you, you can't handle it.

Dr. James Dobson: In what they do with their life, in where they go to college? Give me some specifics.

Sonya Wark: One time with our oldest son, I said to him, "You must respect me." And he said to me, "What have you done to earn it?" And I said, "I don't have to do anything to earn it. God created me. And until I do something so totally rotten that you can't possibly respect me, you owe me respect." I feel the same way about children.

Dr. James Dobson: The same way. They-

Sonya Wark: I feel that they-

Dr. James Dobson: ... are created by God and you owe them respect.

Sonya Wark: Yes. Yes, as individuals and as separate people. And I don't want to expect them to fit my preconceived ideas of how they ought to be. I want to have enough respect for them that they can, even as children, tell me how they feel about any given subject.

Dr. James Dobson: Even a dirty room is not enough for you to sacrifice that respect. Is that right?

Sonya Wark: Nope. Because I think that's their little part of the house that is theirs, and they have a right to keep it the way they want to. Not that you shouldn't teach them how to clean and all that stuff, but that's their own private space. And if they like living messy, go ahead.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. Preserve the relationship at all costs.

Sonya Wark: Right.

Dr. James Dobson: Okay. Sally, you were the anchor lady here.

Sally Marston: Okay. I think of a couple of things. I think back on when my children were in adolescence and the struggles that we went through as their personalities almost seemed to change. It was into a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And I look back and think, well, now what would I have done differently? And I think of two things, listening and acceptance, which goes along with what Sunny said. I think I would ask the Lord for more listening ears to really listen to what they were saying, to give them the extra time that they needed, and then acceptance, accepting them for who they are. I remember an incident when our daughter was in her... It was either eighth grade or high school, and we were fighting back



and forth terribly. And I looked at myself, I stopped and I thought, who is this inside of me?

And I had to stop and see. I was really concerned that my daughter was going to grow up and be fighting and we were going to continue to fight, and I just became very distressed. And at that time, I turned to the Lord and I said, "God, what is it?" And he said, "Sally, your daughter is following your example. You need to be the one to lead the way." And it really challenged me in my own relationship with God and who I was as a parent. Underneath all of that, I really needed to accept her for who she was and not try and mold her and make her into the daughter that I wanted, that I knew was going to be the perfect person. I just accept her for her special gifts and her wonderful personality that she had.

Dr. James Dobson: Boy, that's easy to talk about here. It sure is tough to do, isn't it? In the heat of the emotion, in the conflict and occur in the home, and you get tired and you get irritable and you don't always deal with things rationally. I called my daughter on the phone a couple of weeks ago and apologized for overreacting to something that really wasn't all that significant. And it was a very warm time between us and she really appreciated it. But I was dead wrong. And if it had been in the morning, it would not have happened. It happened at 10 o'clock at night, and I was tired and I just overreacted out of fatigue. And I think, again Judy, the Lord allows us a few of those mistakes, especially if we apologize for them.

Sally Marston: Thank Him for that.

Dr. James Dobson: I thank you for that. I thank the four of you for sharing with us on these broadcasts and for being our guest. And Sunny, you can bake muffins for me anytime you want to.

Sonya Wark: I thought of bringing you some, but I didn't know how many employees you have. I don't think I could do that.

Dr. James Dobson: I used to get those care packages that you were talking about when I was in the Army, and I would look forward to those things. And when they would come, I would tear open the packages and I would open the can that my mother had sent all these cookies in. And you know what would happen? Every troop there would grab for cookies and they'd be gone. So I learned to open those things when nobody else was around, and I learned to eat cookies without chewing. I would press it into the roof of my mouth and kind of work on it with my tongue so they would never know it was there. And if you'll send me some muffins, I will be equally discreet. It's a pleasure to have you all here, and we will plan a reunion of this group down the road someplace.

Sonya Wark: Great.

Dr. James Dobson: God bless you all.

Sally Marston: Thank you.

Judy Berry: Thank you.

Roger Marsh: And on that rather lighthearted note, we conclude this helpful four-part discussion on helping parents prepare for the empty nest season. This was a classic conversation we heard today on Family Talk, a discussion Dr. James Dobson recorded many years ago, but the principles are still relevant even today. Each installment in this four-part series is available for you to download when you go to our broadcast page at [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org). You can stream it right there. And while you are there, you'll also find a web exclusive, a portion of this conversation that is not included in the broadcast edition. It confronts the issue of what happens when your children leave home under less than ideal circumstances. If you have a prodigal, a black sheep among your adult children, be sure to click on this exclusive audio content found only at [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org).

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Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Dr. James Dobson: The empty nest is painful, but it gives you a great perspective on parenting. Several years ago, our youngest child, Ryan, went off to Chicago for his freshman year in college. His final day at home was filled with the hustle and bustle of packing and getting him ready for a new life. And somehow, we missed the gravity of that moment. But then as we were driving into the airport the next morning, an unexpected wave of grief swept over me. I thought I couldn't stand to see him go. It wasn't that I wanted to hold him in childhood or exercise control on his life. No, I mourned the end of an era, a precious time of my life when Ryan and his sister Danae were young and their voices rang in the halls of our house. I couldn't hide the tears as we hug goodbye at gate 18.

If you're thinking that I'm hopelessly sentimental about my kids, you're right. But I hope that my experience conveys a message. For those of you whose children are still under foot. The days that you've been given to care for your kids are much briefer than you think. When you stand where my wife and I are today, you'll know that the parenting responsibility is the most important task in living, and it's worth everything it cost you to do the job, right. Oh, and if you happen to see our son or daughter, ask him to call home, won't you?

Dr. Tim Clinton:

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