



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Loving Your Prodigal Child

Guest(s): Ruth Bell Graham

Air Date: May 2, 2025

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: Welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh and today we're sharing a classic conversation from our archives featuring the late Ruth Bell Graham, wife of evangelist, Billy Graham. As the mother of five children, Ruth knew first-hand the heartache of watching her kids make difficult choices. Her experiences led her to write the book called *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them*, offering hope to parents facing similar struggles with their own children. Ruth was not only the author of 14 books, but she also founded the Ruth and Bill Graham Children's Health Center in Ashville, North Carolina. Her legacy continues through her children and grandchildren, many of whom have joined us here on Family Talk over the years.

Whether you're dealing with a wayward child or simply want to better understand God's heart for prodigals, today's conversation here on Family Talk featuring Dr. Dobson and Ruth Bell Graham offers timeless wisdom and encouragement. Doctor?

Dr. James Dobson: Ruth, I want to begin by thanking you for this opportunity, to chat with you and to express my great appreciation on behalf of all those people out there that are listening to us today and around the world, for the life that you all have lived, and for the sacrifice that you've made for the gospel. And especially, for touching so many of us spiritually. How do we summarize all of those years and all of those miles and all those sacrifices, but I want you to know it's deeply appreciated.

Ruth Bell Graham: Oh, thank you. It hasn't always been easy. Looking back on it, I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Dr. James Dobson: You have written a book, *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them*. And we're going to talk about that subject today on children who go wrong, especially within the context of the Christian family at home. You are a private person and that's a difficult subject for you to address, especially with regard to your own family life. Isn't it?

Ruth Bell Graham: Well, yes and no. I couldn't find a single book on this subject. And I know of so many hurting people, especially Christians, who are going through it, and they feel so guilty that they've had a child who's gone away from the Lord. And once you've loved one prodigal, you love all prodigals. And I just wanted some book that would encourage Christian parents, who are going through this, to know that God had trouble with some of His children, too and that He's with them.

Dr. James Dobson: You did not choose to focus this book on your own children and your own family. Why not?

Ruth Bell Graham: Because I didn't think it would be fair to them. And beside it's not just their story, it's everybody's story.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, I've got a surprise for you, Ruth, because we have talked to both Ned and Franklin. Did you know that?

Ruth Bell Graham: No, that's sneaky.

Dr. James Dobson: I'm sorry to do this to you. We talked about just this issue. We have a recording, a clip from that program that I'd like to share with you now, and then get you to react to it. I might tell you, Franklin said some absolutely wonderful things about you and his father. And this is one of them. Let me share it with you now.

Franklin, your folks handled you very wisely, it looks to me. In the midst of your rebellion you said they did not nag you and they didn't close the door to communication.

Franklin Graham: No, never. That's one of the things I just love about my mom and dad. They always loved me. I remember my father had a conversation with me. This was in Lausanne, Switzerland. They had that conference back in 1974, and I was really having a struggle inside, but I pretended that everything was okay. And my father pulled me aside one day and he said, "Franklin, your mother and I sense that there's a great struggle inside of your life. And you've been riding that fence for a number of years, and I feel that you're going to have to make a decision soon. And I want you to know that at your mother and I, we're praying for you and we love you. And no matter what you do in life, no matter where you go, no matter what you end up, you're always welcome to come home. And the door will always be open to you and we love you."

Dr. James Dobson: Now that was especially meaningful to me because you must have been a terrible embarrassment to your dad for a while.

Franklin Graham: Oh, absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: I mean, here he was-

Franklin Graham: I'm trying.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh, no. He, being in the position of being maybe the most prominent minister of the last 25 years, and people look at a minister's family and say, "Is it real?" And to have a son in rebellion like that must have embarrassed him. And yet he was able to say to you, "Son, I'm with you. I still love you."

Franklin Graham: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: That shows a lot to me.

Franklin Graham: But I remember, I never rebelled against what he stood for, the person of Christ. I never rebelled against that, but I was just wanting to live my life and to enjoy life. And my father realized that there was a great spiritual need in my life. And I needed to come to the Savior. And he realized that my drinking, that my smoking, drugs, the girls, or whatever, that when I came to Christ, that these things Christ would deal with. So he never made them issues. But when I got to 16, he realized that I was at that age where there wasn't much more he could do, except just keep those channels open and love us. He would let us know when we were wrong. He would let us know if there was something that he didn't like. He wasn't a pansy. He wasn't afraid to confront us. He would let us know his views, but then he wouldn't push it. He would drop it.

Dr. James Dobson: That was recorded a couple of years ago, as I recall. Ruth, those were very warm and loving comments that came from Franklin. I have a letter here from Ned. Let me read it to you. He said, "Dear mother..." I don't know why he sent it to me, but... "Dear mother, the embodiment of a patient prayer." He's referring to you. "This is your number two prodigal expressing my deep thanks and gratitude for the unconditional love that both you and dad have demonstrated over the years, even during my time of rebellion against God's call to the ministry. I never once doubted your unconditional love and acceptance of me because of your love, your patience, and your example. I have learned what it means to walk in faith and above all what it means to be obedient. And there I have found true satisfaction. It's my prayer that your and dad's example and my example, you've always said that no one is totally worthless. They can always serve as a horrible example, can be used to encourage both the prodigals and those who love them. You're loving and thankful son."

Ruth Bell Graham: That's sweet.

Dr. James Dobson: There is encouragement in this for those who are going through this tough time now. And that's the reason that I've focused on both these boys, because they've both not only come back to the Lord, but are being used by the Lord. And I think there's some parents of adolescents today that need to hear that, don't you?

Ruth Bell Graham: Well, I suppose, I mean, I do think we mustn't sacrifice our children on the altar of ministry. We love them for themselves as individuals, and whether they ever come back to the Lord or not, we'd go right on loving them to the end.

Dr. James Dobson: What is this central theme or the primary message that you wanted to convey to the parents of prodigals in writing this book?

Ruth Bell Graham: Hope. The fact that God is faithful. And I was talking to someone last night, whose son was gone 26 years and came back. And there's some like John Newton's mother, who never lived to see her son come back. I think maybe God and His mercy took her when her son was about six years old. I'm not sure as frail as she was, she could have lived through all that he became and the depths to which he sank. But that's the faithfulness of God that there are no hopeless situations with God. He's not finished with us yet.

Dr. James Dobson: In fact, in your book, you focus on Newton, any other details in his personal life?

Ruth Bell Graham: When we think of John Newton, I think most of us think of Amazing Grace. That's very apropos, because we don't realize how low he sank, how far he went. His mother had trained him in Scripture verses and Bible teaching when he was a little boy. He was reading Latin when he was, by the time he was six. Not only did he work on slave ships, but he became an atheist and used to invent blasphemies that shocked other sailors. I mean, there are no depths to which he could go that he didn't sink. And interestingly enough, he worked on slave ships, but he didn't, not himself become a slave trader until after his conversion. Then he got out of the business altogether and he eventually wound up an Anglican clergyman. And one of his friends was, Wilberforce. And they became very close, and Wilberforce said that he'd never spent as long as 20 minutes in Newton's presence. But what Newton expressed his deep regret and deep remorse over his slave trading days, and then Wilberforce was a close friend of the Prime Minister. And together they led the fight against the slave trade, which ended the slave trade in Great Britain. And you can see how God used the experience of his child to help bring the past, the ending of that horrible industry. When we hear "Amazing Grace," that's exactly what it was. It was something special. He was really a godly man.

Dr. James Dobson: So, the period of rebellion of the early years gave rise to something very different when he became mature?

Ruth Bell Graham: God used it. God used it. And someone said, "God never wastes the experience of His children." I think, it would not have been possible for him to feel the depth of loathing for slavery, if he hadn't experienced himself personally.

Dr. James Dobson: Can you give us, Ruth, a window into that period of your family life when your two boys were going through such rebellion without being too personal or putting you under a microscope. I think people would identify with your feelings and your concern during that time as a mother. What was that like?

Ruth Bell Graham: I tell you, it drives you to your knees. It drives you to the Scriptures, for the promises. You pray continually and you know that God is faithful and you just don't know how, you don't know when, you don't know how long, and you don't

know what's going to happen in the meantime. And it's instinctive, I think, to worry, when a son or daughter is on drugs or is drinking, you don't know what they'll do to other people, people as well as to themselves, while they're under the influence. So my concern was not just for them, but for what might happen through them. I remember when Franklin was going to drive a Land Rover to Amman, Jordan, picked it up in London, and he had been near Amman, there's a place called Mouth Rock. And he said, "Mom, they sure do need a Land Rover fully equipped for the desert," but then we didn't feel like he should go by himself.

He was this goof off. And so we asked his college roommate, who was a solid Christian who had been in Vietnam for three tours of duty as a helicopter pilot, and wonderful. He'd explode with laughter when he... Just great, great guy and Bill Cristobal said, yes, he would take a semester off from college and go with Franklin. And I remember Bill Cristobal laughing later on telling me how hairy it was driving through Turkey because Franklin would drive with one hand on the steering wheel and the other hand had a flask of whiskey because he said he could drive better if he was relaxed.

Dr. James Dobson: I can imagine.

Ruth Bell Graham: I tell you, before they started off, I was praying John 17. I took that as my prayer for Bill and Franklin. And I came to this verse, and this was our Lord's prayer, before He went to the cross. And He said, "For their sakes, I sanctify myself that they also may be sanctified through the truth." Later on, I heard what a wild trip it was, but they got it to the hospital where it was supposed to go. And the interesting thing is today, Franklin is chairman of the board of that hospital.

Dr. James Dobson: Isn't that exciting? One of the poems in this book, and you have a number of your poems in this book, is called "Sunk in this Gray Depression." Let me read it. You said, "Sunk in this gray depression. I cannot pray. How can I give expression when there are no words to say. This massive, vague foreboding of aching care. Love with its overloading short circuits prayer. Then through this fog of tiredness, this nothingness, I find only a quiet knowing that He is kind." That was written in September 1980. Is that autobiographical?

Ruth Bell Graham: Yes. Most of those poems about the prodigals were definitely autobiographical, because that's the way I worked through some of the worries. It was just therapy for me.

Dr. James Dobson: So, depression goes along with being the mother of a prodigal?

Ruth Bell Graham: It is. Well, maybe, a woman of great faith could ride the waves better than I did. But, and I knew that God was faithful, but I didn't have much faith in myself and was so afraid that I'd made irreparable mistakes. At times, you feel so guilty. You feel it's your fault that they've done this. I mean, there's this deep concern and you wrestle with God in prayer pleading for him, but then you have to run a

home and you have to entertain guests and you have to do other things. At times, you just have to say, "Lord, you take care of him while I go on about the work." I mean, God was God and there was work to do.

Dr. James Dobson: Ruth, encourage the mother, we'll say, who's listening to us today, who's just about despaired. Her son or her daughter is 18 years of age, is doing things with his or her body that she never in her wildest imagination, would've expected; taking drugs, and into sex, all kinds of terrible things. That's happening all across the world, around the world. What do you say to the mother, who is so depressed today that she can hardly function because of that?

Ruth Bell Graham: I'd say, try to treat your child as God treats you. Compared to God's holiness. What a mess we got ourselves into. I mean, we may not be on drugs and what they did, but I mean, compared to God's holiness, we're a mess, but He's not through with us yet. And I would say above everything, keep your eyes on the Lord, and love them. I don't care what they do, love them and let them know you love them. They desperately need your love. And sometimes they express it in such strange ways, in hostility, and rebellion, and sometimes rudeness. They're crying out for help, but it doesn't sound like it.

Dr. James Dobson: How in the world can you love them when they're so unlovable? That's the salient feature of the quote from my interview with Franklin is that he said, there was unconditional love there even when he was rebelling and going into such a terrible conflict. How did you accomplish that? How can you love someone who's doing everything they can to tear you up emotionally and tear up the family?

Ruth Bell Graham: How did God love us? I mean, I've often wondered how on earth God loved us so much that He sent His son to die for us. What did you see in us that was lovable? Some of the most inspiring saints were the most revolting sinners. And yet, God loved us. And I think it's instinctive to love your own child. I mean, you can't help but love them. You don't love what they're doing. It's like when they were little, I mean, Franklin or Ned would come in grimy, smelly, like all little boys, and sometimes I'd make them leave the clothes in the boiler room or the washroom and shower off before they come in the house. So you love them, and you welcome them home, but not the dirt, not what comes with them.

Dr. James Dobson: It's the love that makes it so frustrating when they won't do right, isn't it?

Ruth Bell Graham: Absolutely. And love hurts. It hurts to love. It'd be so much easier if you could harden your heart and just close the door and forget, but you can't. You go on loving them.

Dr. James Dobson: We've talked a little bit about Franklin's rebellion. I think we need to give equal time to Ned. He also went through a tough time and got on drugs, too. Didn't he?

Ruth Bell Graham: Yes. Longer, perhaps, than Franklin. I remember how I prayed for him that the Lord would keep him, and what have you. And he told me a few years ago that he used to go to town and get drugs and sell them to the kids at school. So obviously, God didn't see it fit to answer the prayer I prayed, but he said, "Mom, don't worry about it." I said, God's using all these things and my ministry as I counsel other people, and he came home and was going to college and I went, I had written out some Bible verses and I was hiding them in different places; truck, above the sun visor and different parts. And in the pocket of the truck, I found marijuana. So I went and faced him with it and his dad and I talked to him and he'd lie up one side and down the other, but we'd caught him with the evidence. Now, he claims that I threw it in the fireplace, and the chimney smoked and the whole house was filled with it. I'd forgotten that part. It could be-

Dr. James Dobson: So, everybody was just a little happy for a day or two.

Ruth Bell Graham: Yes, that's according to him. Could have been. It could have been.

Dr. James Dobson: Isn't it interesting now that both those boys who went through that kind of rebellion and actually were using illegal substances are in the ministry today. There is hope in that story.

Ruth Bell Graham: Absolutely. God is faithful. And Ned was very honest. He's the kind, let's say, he'd clap on your bed at about 11 o'clock at night, just let everything all hang, just talk everything out and your eyes would be about half closed by three o'clock in the morning, Ned's still going strong, but it helped to listen and to know what was going on inside of him. But this drug business kept up after he was married. He married a wonderful girl, a nurse from the Mayo Clinic. And I credit her with a great deal of patience with him. He wouldn't even go to church with her at first. I don't know how the Lord got through to him, but He did. And today he is one of the associate ministers at the church in California, and has a tremendous interest in China. They've started an organization of which he's the head, that hopes to serve the Lord in China. And all I can say, it's a faithfulness of God and the grace of God.

Dr. James Dobson: In the interview that I did with Franklin, he made it very clear that his rebellion was not against his parents. That'll be hard for people to understand, but I believe him that the rebellion was not against his parents. It was a desire to taste life. In fact, we have one more recorded clip from that interview. I want you to hear it at this moment.

Franklin Graham: I'm here today because of prayer. And my parents prayed me through that turbulent period in my life. And maybe that is simplistic prayer, but my parents loved me enough to pray for me.

Dr. James Dobson: I believe in that.

Franklin Graham: And my grandfather and grandmother, so I'm here today because of prayer and the grace of God.

Dr. James Dobson: You knew they were praying for you too, didn't you?

Franklin Graham: Absolutely. And as a parent now, with four children of my own and three sons, I realize how important prayer is because now I lay in bed at night, thinking my children are coming to their teenage years. I knew what I did. And I know my parents only know half of it. They don't know all the other things that I did. And I'm never going to tell them.

Dr. James Dobson: You are telling them right now.

Franklin Graham: I'm ashamed. But yet I just pray that God will protect my children.

Dr. James Dobson: Ruth, speak specifically to what the Bible has to say about intercessory prayer of one person being able to pray for another one. Even if that person is not praying for themselves and doesn't maybe have the faith to do so, you can still go to the Lord on their behalf.

Ruth Bell Graham: I was enormously encouraged when I was reading through the gospels, and it dawned on me how many times God answered prayer in behalf of someone, not the victim themselves, but someone who loved that victim, or who was a friend of the victim like that man, borne of four, let down through the roof. When Jesus saw their faith, He said in him. And then Jairus' daughter, she was apparently dead, but the father sent for Jesus over and over again. And the man who had a son, who had a demon, and sometimes he threw himself into the fire and sometimes into the water. And he asked the Lord for help. In fact, the majority of cases, the person didn't ask help for themselves. It's someone who loved them, asked for them, and Jesus never turned them down, which encourages me as a mother. We can pray not only for our own children, but other prodigals and other parents, and know that no matter how rebellious they are, God's going to hear our prayer.

Dr. James Dobson: What a wonderful gift that is to us from the Lord, that He allows us to not only pray about our own concerns, but to bring the concerns of others. That's a tremendous benefit in the Christian way of life.

Ruth Bell Graham: And the other thing that the Lord taught me, and this lifted an awful load off my shoulders. And that was when He told me, "Hey, you take care of the possible and trust Me for the impossible." For years, I've been trying to convict of sin, create a hunger and thirst after righteousness, convert. And God said to me, "That's not your business. Those are miracles and miracles in my department. You love them, encourage them, take care of their needs. Be a mother. You take care of the possible. And trust Me for the impossible." Wow, what a load lifted.

Dr. James Dobson: One of the prayers that Shirley and I have prayed for our kids through the years is that in those moments, when our children would stand at a crossroads with two separate directions, one leading toward what's right, and one leading toward what's wrong, that the Lord would put an influential person at that crossroads when they were beyond our reach, when they were beyond our influence that the Lord would strategically place a person at that spot. I began praying that when my daughter was two and our son was not even born yet.

Ruth, our time is gone. I want to thank you again for granting this interview, for writing this book, and for your great heart for other mothers and fathers out there who are now where you were. Any last thing you want to say to them?

Ruth Bell Graham: Just remember the faithfulness of God.

Dr. James Dobson: That's a pretty good bottom line for the entire book, isn't it?

Ruth Bell Graham: Right. That's what it is.

Roger Marsh: You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and a classic conversation Dr. Dobson had with the late Ruth Bell Graham. By the way if you missed any portion of today's broadcast or if you'd like to share it with a friend, simply go online to drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org.

Well, seems hard to believe we had the National Day of Prayer yesterday and now Mother's Day is coming up a week from this Sunday. We want to celebrate the incredible women who shape our lives with their love, wisdom and sacrifice and that's why here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, we've created a brand-new series, it's absolutely free, that delivers five minutes of encouragement delivered straight to your email inbox each and every day. It's called the "Empowering Moms" series. Now this series offers practical, Scripture-based advice along with a daily prayer to refresh your spirit during busy days.

You know being a mom might be the world's most rewarding job, but it's also definitely one of the most challenging. So whether you're a new mom or a seasoned veteran, maybe even a grandma who's providing more maternal care for your grandchildren these days, these timely messages will remind you of your profound purpose. When you go to drjamesdobson.org, you can start receiving the "Empowering Moms" series. All you have to do is sign in with your name and email address and we'll start hitting your inbox right away. It's just our small way of saying thank you for the immeasurable difference that you make as a mom and as a grandmother. Again for the free "Empowering Moms" email series, go to drjamesdobson.org. Put in your name and email address and the process will begin from there.

Well I'm Roger Marsh and on behalf of Dr. James Dobson and all of us here at Family Talk, thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again next

time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust, for the family you love.

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