



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Free at Last! – Part 1

Guest(s): Bill and Deb Kennedy

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Dr. James Dobson: Hello everyone. You're listening to Family Talk, a radio broadcasting ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. James Dobson, and thank you for joining us for this program.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. You know, it was August the 21st that Dr. Dobson went home to be with the Lord. He was just 89 years of age and there were many stories that Doctor told, and fortunately we've recorded most of them. Stories that really had a deep and powerful and profound impact on his life. And today you're going to hear part one of those remarkable stories, Bill and Debbie Kennedy, a couple who endured an unimaginable 17 year separation when Bill was wrongfully convicted of a crime and sentenced to federal prison. What makes the Kennedy story so incredible isn't just the injustice that Bill faced or the incredible faithfulness that Debbie showed during those long years. It's how both of them chose to trust God's plan even when everything seemed so hopeless. Let's get into part one of this powerful story we've entitled "Free At Last" and here to begin today's program is Dr. James Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: I want to start today's program by providing some history and background for the two guests who are with us today, and I will introduce them in just a moment. When I was 26 years old and so very, very young, I was a doctoral student in child development at the University of Southern California and one of the requirements was that I teach for two years in the public schools and those were two of the most enjoyable years of my life because I loved those students, those junior high kids. I mean I missed them on the weekend and my wife never understood that, but I did. Now, one of my eighth grade students was a young superstar named Bill Kennedy. He was the neatest kid. He was the best athlete in the school, especially in basketball, and he was student body president and all the teachers liked Bill Kennedy because he was just a great young man.

You don't always say that about eighth graders, but Bill was one. And when that year ended, I did finish my graduate work and our lives went in separate directions and I lost track of Bill and yet we occasionally crossed paths. And I remember one of those times occurred in 1985, I think, Bill, wasn't it? You came to see me. By then, he was a very successful, and then again, I lost track of him. The next thing I heard, however, is that Bill had been involved in a very successful business. It involves selling gold and silver and platinum. And because

of some mismanagement, the company went bankrupt and a lot of people lost money. And then a very aggressive prosecutor came in and charged Bill with a RICO crime. Now, RICO represents those that deliberately defrauded people and there was a conspiracy to get others involved in it across state lines.

That's what he was charged with. What he was really guilty of was mismanagement. But this prosecutor managed to get Bill convicted of that offense and we're going to talk about that. And he was sentenced, this great kid that I knew and I loved was sentenced to 20 years in a federal prison. It just didn't add up. I mean it just didn't fit. He married Debbie and they had three children and still do. And Bill served 17 years of that...

Bill Kennedy: And three months.

Dr. James Dobson: And three months. 17 years and three months of that sentence and was released only last August. And even today he's on probation and has to report his whereabouts at all times as though he's some kind of great threat to the United States. It is a sad story, but it's one that's been used by the Lord in the Kennedy's lives and also been used to bless many inmates in the federal prison and others who have known him. And they have been certainly a blessing to Shirley and me. So our guests today are Bill and Debbie Kennedy, and as Martin Luther King said in his I Have a Dream Speech, "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last."

Bill Kennedy: Amen, brother.

Dr. James Dobson: Bill, I am so delighted to see you here. We talked about this day for many years. I did work hard to get you released because it was so wrong. These were charges that were not accurate, not true. You were an innocent man. You made mistakes, but you weren't involved in a RICO crime. I mean, it's just ridiculous. Furthermore, I had a cadre of people that were also working on this case, including Chuck Colson, who had been in the White House in the Nixon era, and Tim LaHaye who gave a lot of money to help you with your legal fees. And Judge Charles Pickering, here he is a federal judge. He weighed in on it.

Bill Kennedy: And Craig Parshall.

Dr. James Dobson: And Craig Parshall and he was your lead attorney and I had some people in government; we could not for some reason get them to take seriously what had happened to you. And in incredibly every single one of your staff members who were charged in this case were acquitted and released everyone except you.

Bill Kennedy: Which was good. And one of the reasons I got acquitted is I had my lawyer tell the jury that I made the business decisions, not them, but that does not make me a criminal going bankrupt, but if they feel so then hang it on me. And their lawyers later at sentencing wrote affidavit saying the reason their defendants

got acquitted is because I did take that blame. And as a result, there were 16 wives that had their husbands at home and 48 children that had their daddies.

Dr. James Dobson: Bill, did you ever intend to defraud anybody?

Deb Kennedy: Absolutely not.

Dr. James Dobson: Ever?

Bill Kennedy: Absolutely not. In fact, this has been a major contention with Debbie and I because we put everything in to pay these creditors.

Dr. James Dobson: Debbie, what were you feeling and thinking?

Deb Kennedy: First of all, I didn't think that he would get convicted. I thought he was going to be acquitted because the burden of proof hadn't been proved. But when it actually came down to that guilty verdict, I just stood there and froze and my mind went blank and I thought, "I don't know what we're going to do."

Dr. James Dobson: How many children did you have by then?

Deb Kennedy: Three.

Dr. James Dobson: All three.

Bill Kennedy: Yeah, we had three.

Dr. James Dobson: And one of them was mentally disabled.

Deb Kennedy: Yeah, we've got Rob, who is our eldest and he's mentally challenged and special needs and everything. And then we had a daughter who was 19 in college and a son who was 16 in high school. So when that all happened, Bill turned around and looked at me and he mouthed the words, "This is just a test." And I sat there and I was not...

Dr. James Dobson: A divine test, God's test.

Deb Kennedy: And at the time, I did not want to give the prosecuting attorney any ammunition whatsoever. And I forced myself not to tear up, cry, anything. So I just stood there stone faced and everybody else was acquitted and let go. And one of the fellows that was a co-defendant that got acquitted came up to give me a hug and my knees buckled. I never had that happen before. But I pulled myself...

Dr. James Dobson: Did you fall his arm?

Deb Kennedy: Yeah, I did. I fell into his arms and I just thought, "Okay, I've got to get home to the kids." This is in Denver. Our children were in San Diego. So I called and I said,

"I've got to get the first flight out and get back to San Diego so I can be there and tell the kids." And I was very stoic through the whole flight, sat there and just kept thinking, "I don't know what we're going to do. I don't know what we're going to do." And I called some dear friends of ours and I said, "Can you pick me up at the airport?" And once they did and I got in the back of their car, that's when I let everything just fly. So it wasn't a fun time.

Dr. James Dobson: It was not a test and it was not a threat. It was for real, 20 years. Bill, that's the part of it that I just can't understand. I mean, I just saw Bill O'Reilly several nights ago, railing at a judge for giving a man, I think one year in prison and then some kind of release probation after he had sexually assaulted four or maybe five kids and had been convicted for him, served one year, and you serve 17 of a 20 year sentence for a white collar crime where there's no evidence whatsoever of a conspiracy yet that's what they hung on you. Are you a bitter man today?

Bill Kennedy: No. No. In fact, I'm thankful for what's happened.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, come on, Bill.

Bill Kennedy: No, I really am. And I don't know. It's something because I think that that to be able to experience the Lord the way I did and my wife did, my family, and to have the impact that God had on me and the impact that He had on others through me, actually I had freedom. I don't think I had any real peace. I was always a man of let's accomplish this. I had these goals.

Dr. James Dobson: Now you missed 17 anniversaries. Probably at least dozens if not maybe a hundred or more birthdays. Your children grew up. You have five grandchildren.

Bill Kennedy: Six now.

Dr. James Dobson: Six grandchildren, and have not been part of the family life. Debbie, you were able to come to see Bill, how often?

Deb Kennedy: Well, the first, what, 10 years I guess, I'd see him once a month because he was located in different parts of the country. So most of the time I'd go once a month to see him.

Deb Kennedy: And that's the problem with the federal prisons is they put him so far away from the family and Debbie would have to get up at two in the morning to come see me from Lompoc to Lompoc and Taft and then come home with the wear and tear of the car. And the other thing is the expense. And I remember when you came to interview me in prison and how you gave her a big nice check for visitation and it just talks that just says a lot about the authenticity of your...

Dr. James Dobson: My heart ached for you guys. It really did. The day that we came, I was able to visit the federal prison, what was the name of it?

Bill Kennedy: Taft. Taft Federal.

Dr. James Dobson: With four or five of my friends. And Debbie, you were there that day and I interviewed you, Bill. We still have that tape, but it just put a lump in my throat to see what you were going through. But you didn't become bitter. I don't see any evidence of it today.

Bill Kennedy: Well, because I have joy in my heart and I think that's where I got freedom. And if I could say this, freedom came in November 18th, 1995 for me. I had been in two years and lost my appeal. Look, I thought I'd get in and out that somebody would see the truth, and I was pretty bitter, pretty angry. And it was causing hard time when Debbie came to visit and I couldn't understand her suffering, and I spent, I think that was the weekend, and I spent with a roll of toilet paper with the Holy Spirit. And God just gently told me how about He loved me, but I've got some things in my life that don't please Him. And I said, "God, listen. I'm going to just turn all this over to you and I'm going to stop doing these things that displease you."

I just want to have joy. And then another thing happened is I just asked God, "Do you love me?" And that afternoon, that was January '96, I just started crying with joy on the compound of Lobo because God was showing me that He loved me. And at that point, I just had a love for what I was doing in love of others and stopped focusing on, Bill, started focusing on the husband that Debbie needed and deserved that she hadn't had before. Stop being so demanding on her at home and God started working and He gave me joy and He started showing myself to me, and He did it a very loving way. It was like peeling an onion.

Dr. James Dobson: Debbie, you're the hero of this story.

Bill Kennedy: Amen.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, you really are. You waited for him for 17 years.

Deb Kennedy: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: And can you imagine 17 years going by one day at a time and making all those trips to see Bill and what depression there must have been driving home from those visits knowing it would be another month before she would see him again and not having any guarantee that he would be out before 20 years. And yet, Debbie, you hung tough. I mean, I'm sure there were men in your life, I'm sure that there were temptations for you and yet you didn't bail on this man. Were you tempted to do so?

Deb Kennedy: Never. Never. Jim, one thing in my lifetime that I've realized is that if I make a determination to do something and I made my vows to God and to Bill and that I was going to go through this, I would not allow myself to even get in any

positions that would give me that temptation. And that's what I did. I had many friends that were single that would invite me to go do things with them. And one time I did it and I saw things that I didn't really want, so I never did that again. I would basically be by myself many times, but it was better that way to not have anything in my life that was a hindrance to what I felt God wanted me to do. I found that with our Sunday school class. It was all at the time. It was started 25 years ago. It was young married, so it's not anymore. I would go to the events because they knew Bill and they knew his innocence and that type of thing. But I would go and I'd be fine for the first hour. And then after that I'd see all the couples and I'd feel they were so loving and kind, but it was still just me. And so it was kind of like I'm missing part of me and I need to go home. So I would go home.

Dr. James Dobson: Debbie, did you have a lot of people praying for you?

Deb Kennedy: Constantly. Constantly. It was very interesting because there were very few people that were even negative about this whole thing with Bill. I mean, nobody ever said anything to me one, but I mean the individuals that supported us were so amazing. And the most interesting thing that I had that happened that I am totally blessed about is that the weekend after this all happened with Bill, one of the gals in my Sunday school class that I did not know very well, I knew of her but did not know her well. She said, "We're going to lunch." And I said, "Well, I didn't feel like going out to eat lunch." She goes, "No, we're going to lunch." And she took me out and we went down to San Diego Harbor and we sat up on the rooftop overlooking the harbor and she said, "So what are you going to do? You're going to leave him?" And very blunt, I mean, it was just like I said, "No, I'm not going to leave them." She said, "Well, what are you going to do with your life? What about this? What about that?" And she started asking me questions and I thought, I need to think about this. And that's where some of my determinations came because somebody confronted me and I basically said, "You're right. I have to make a decision now and I'm going to stick with it."

Dr. James Dobson: You were an administrative assistant trying to pay for an entire family, weren't you?

Deb Kennedy: Yes sir.

Dr. James Dobson: How'd you make that work?

Deb Kennedy: Well, that was very interesting. I started working about five days before Bill was arrested. I had not worked all those years. It was very little money. Fortunately, we didn't desire, I mean, I didn't have much and I sold a lot of our things that was very helpful to be able to sell things that we had, possessions. They don't mean anything to me. I didn't want to store them. Let's sell them and use that money to buy food and pay the gas bill and that type of thing. Life has a way of just being an opportunity for others to show they care. And I was always a very self-sufficient person, but when people started giving me money, it was hard. It was hard to take it, but I was so grateful for it and very thankful that they had

done that. And it gave me a chance to learn humility and accept their gifts. And that's basically what they did. Nobody ever said anything derogatory. They just said, "We love you. We know you need something. Here you go."

Dr. James Dobson: It is so encouraging to hear cases like that where it happens because you often hear the opposite. You hear people say, they didn't care about me. They don't care whether I'd live or die. And it's not true. Christian people are good people.

Deb Kennedy: They are excellent.

Dr. James Dobson: And there were other components to it that we haven't talked much about. But you have this son who was almost grown at the time that you went in.

Bill Kennedy: 21 years old.

Deb Kennedy: And he wasn't able to take care of himself and there wasn't a lot of money to get additional help or to put him into a facility and you had that burden on you too. Did you ever in your prayers look upward and just say, "Lord, I can't carry this. It's too much to handle."

Deb Kennedy: I think that there were times that were extremely hard, but I never said I can't do it. I felt that it was given to me as an opportunity, a challenge to come out better on the other end. And I really clung to the Scriptures that said, you will get through this. The Lord will be there with you through the situation. So that's what I held onto.

Dr. James Dobson: I tell you, that is a testimony to all of us. There is another dimension to all this that I want to make sure we talk about because you were done wrong. People lied about you, and the system itself seems stacked against you. But it's been my observation that sooner or later that will happen in one way or another to nearly everybody. Somebody will stab you in the back, someone will walk out on you, someone will promise things to you and then not deliver. Some will steal from your business. Somebody will do that to you. And so you have to decide hopefully in advance, how are you going to deal with that? How are you going to handle that? Because the typical way is with anger. And if there is a takeaway message that I would like our listeners to get from your story, it is that when that moment comes, you let the Lord carry it because you can't carry it. That will destroy me. Bitterness will destroy you quicker than somebody coming after you with a gun.

Bill Kennedy: Dr. Dobson, that was the thing that God put in my heart that He was going to take this and make good out of it. And Charles Swindoll wrote a book on Moses and he said these three things that impressed upon me, and that was, when circumstances turn against you, they force dependence and circumstances that force dependence teach us patience and circumstances that force patience, teach us patience makes us wise. And I think the wisdom comes when we realize that it's not about us.

Dr. James Dobson: That is so well said, Bill. And I have to tell you something. I didn't know what frame of mind you were going to be in when you came here after 17 years. I didn't know what that experience would have done to you and to have you here and to see how you have learned from the experience you've learned about life, and you learned about the character of God from the wrong things that have been done. I mean, others intended it for evil, but God intended it for good and He's done that in your life and you're in a position now to share what you've learned with others. And that's why I am so glad you're here today and in fact, you've got more to say. And will you be with us again tomorrow?

Bill Kennedy: We will.

Deb Kennedy: Thank you.

Roger Marsh: 17 years behind bars for a wrongful conviction that would make anyone bitter. And yet God used this experience to teach Bill and Debbie Kennedy patience, wisdom, and to fully rely on Him. You're listening to a special edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, and as we remember the life and legacy of Dr. Dobson, we felt it appropriate today to share this conversation featuring Dr. Dobson and Bill and Debbie Kennedy. Now to hear today's broadcast again, you can go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. That's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. One of Dr. Dobson's greatest passions was helping parents navigate the beautiful but challenging journey of raising children. And that's why we've created our "Raising Kids with Love and Limits" email series based on the timeless wisdom found in Dr. Dobson's *Complete Marriage and Family Reference Guide*. Now, you can start receiving these emails even today. It's free. All you have to do to sign up is go to drjamesdobson.org and click the link that you'll find there. That's drjamesdobson.org.

You know the extraordinary legacy that Dr. Dobson has left of strengthening families continues through your prayers and faithful financial partnership with this ministry. Dr. Dobson dedicated his life to introducing people to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to promoting biblical principles that build strong marriages and families. And even today, we are carrying forward that sacred mission, preserving and promoting the institution of the family while sharing the hope of Jesus Christ. Now, you can make a secure donation to continue this work when you go to drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org. You can also give us a call at 877-732-6825. A member of our constituent care team will be happy to assist you there. Again, that's 877-732-6825.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh and on behalf of all of us here at Family Talk, thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again next time for part two of Dr. Dobson's powerful conversation with Bill and Debbie Kennedy. That's coming up right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you can still trust, for the family you love.

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