Bob: Mike Dennehy is a dad to nine adopted children. He says there have been days when some of those kids have wished they weren’t in the Dennehy family—like a daughter they adopted from Ethiopia.

Mike: She, literally, put all her stuff in a backpack and left our home. We didn’t even know she had gone. She just walked out our front door, with all her stuff, and said, “I’m going back to Africa.” We found her on a road, walking. She wanted nothing to do with us. We actually sat her down and said: “No matter what you do to us—if you don’t talk to us, if you don’t hug us, if you walk away from us—we’re still going to love you. You can’t stop us from loving you.”

Now, we’re able to hug her. I helped her, this week, do a school project. Sharon went on a little soccer trip with her—she made a soccer team, here in the US. She’s a different person.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, December 18th. Our host is Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. Mike and Sharon Dennehy join us today to talk about the joys and the challenges of being adoptive parents to nine adopted children. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Tuesday edition. You know, the reality of adoption, for a family, is that there are going to be some challenges. There’s going to be some degree of difficulty that comes into a family when you add a new child. When you add a new baby that the two of you conceived, that’s going to add challenge. You add an adopted child, that’s going to bring challenge. If you add an adopted child with special needs—now it seems like you’ve raised the degree of difficulty again. Then, you add multiple special-needs. At some point, you go, “It would take Superman to raise these kids!”

Dennis: Well, I think we have Superman and Superwoman.

Bob: Both here?! [Laughter] That’s good! [Laughter]

Sharon: You wouldn’t say that if you were at home with us. [Laughter]

Dennis: We’re going to get to that! [Laughter]
Bob: We’ll find out!

Sharon: Okay.

Dennis: Michael and Sharon Dennehy join us again on *FamilyLife Today*. Michael/Sharon—welcome back.

Mike: Thanks.

Sharon: Thanks.

Dennis: Michael and Sharon live in Richmond, Virginia. They started out their marriage in 1983 and have adopted nine. They have three biological children: Erin, who’s 26; Marissa, who’s 24; and Ryan, who’s 22. Then, you’ve got a bunch of adopted boys and girls, ages 7 all the way to 18. Did I get that right?

Mike: Pretty close; yes; that’s good.

Dennis: Well, it changes monthly; doesn’t it?

Sharon: It changes often.

Mike: Yes; I don’t think we actually know, either. [Laughter]

Dennis: Let’s go back to Bob’s statement that, “I think we tend to idealize adoption.” Yet, you’ve chosen to go the route of special-needs children. How many of these nine that you adopted are special needs?

Sharon: I would say four have physical special needs; but then, you know, when you’re adopting from a bad situation, you end up with a lot of psychological needs, too, that you can’t see.

Bob: Mike, you know, there are people listening, right now, who are saying: “Look, we have got two kids. I have got all I can say grace over with two kids.” It must take—like I said—Superman and Superwoman. It must take somebody uniquely-gifted to have as many kids as you have—to go out and adopt them—that have the special needs. Do you feel like this is something that you’re called and set apart to—the two of you—or do you feel like more people are called to this than think they are?

Mike: I think it’s not as hard as you think it is. I have gotten that line from a lot of people—right?—“We have three,” or “We have two, and we don’t have a moment to breathe.” A couple of things there—first of all, that’s a natural reaction; but I think those people have fallen a little bit for the American version of childhood and the American version of family; which is, “Everything has got to perfect”—as Sharon said.
But, also, it’s a little bit like spiritual bungee jumping. You take on something that you thought you never could do; and you realize: “I lived! This child is safe and sound, and healthy now. Our family’s not only what it was, but it’s more. We’re happy. Life goes on. God took care of us.” Then, you do it again. You’re still a little scared each time. It actually gets easier and easier. We have this running joke in our family, “Once you get down to zero personal time, you can’t go lower.” [Laughter] So, why not just keep going at this; right?

Dennis: If my daughter, Ashley, was here—Ashley is our oldest. She’s married to an OB doctor. They have five boys, ages four to thirteen—lots going on. She and Michael stepped out and decided to become foster parents. She’s now had nine foster babies or young children that she has cared for. She says the most oft-repeated phrase is the one you just said: “Oh, I could never do that!”

Mike: Yes.

Dennis: That’s the reason she says people don’t. She says, “I have the response, Daddy.” She said: “You know what? I couldn’t do it either if God didn’t give me the strength to be able to do it.”

She becomes a little like her dad, at this point. You’d have to know Ashley—she’s not a table-pounding person, but she begins to pound the table—she says: “You know, I think to say, ‘I could never do that,’ is a cop-out of not trusting God and asking God, ‘What do You want me to do?’ It’s not a matter of saying, ‘I could never do it,’ but just stepping back and saying: ‘Okay, God. What would You want me to do about that?’”

Bob: But you better—if you’re going to do that—you’re going to take that step out in faith—and I agree with you—

Dennis: I’m not saying they should adopt, necessarily, or even become foster care parents.

Bob: But if you’re thinking about it / you’re praying about it—you think, “Maybe God would have us do that,” —you better go into this with your eyes open, because I do think there’s this picture—

Sharon: That’s true.

Bob: —I watched a beautiful video that’s done of your family: I Like Adoption. The kids are smiling in that video, and playing with each other, and they’re getting along. I watched that; and I thought, “Who doesn’t want this family?!” I know there have to have been days when it’s been dark at your house and when the reality of the special needs—not so much the physical, maybe, as much as some of the soul-scars that some of your kids have—when you thought, “Are we able to handle what God’s given to us?”
**Sharon:** There have been those moments. We had some attachment issues with some of the older kids. You know, they would test us. What they're doing is trying to see if you'll really be there for them, because they don't believe that. We just said to them, “We’re going to love you no matter what you do to us.” I think, you know, it's really—Jesus models that for us. We just try to do that in our own home.

**Bob:** Mike, tell us how you handled attachment issues; because listeners are going: “I’ve got that with my two-year-old—trying to drop him off at the nursery at church. They will not go in.” What did you guys do when George is screaming, because he doesn’t want—I’m talking as a baby; not anymore—when he was a baby, what did you do?

**Mike:** We just tried to be Christ-like where we could. I mean, we had an Ethiopian daughter join us. She, literally—talk about attachment issues—she, literally, put all of her stuff in a backpack and left our home. We didn't even know she had gone. She just walked out our front door, with all her stuff, and said, “I'm going back to Africa.” We found her on a road, walking. She wanted nothing to do with us.

Now, we’re able to hug her. I helped her, this week, do a school project. Sharon went on a little soccer trip with her—she made a soccer team, here in the US. She’s a different person.

**Bob:** But how did you get from “I'm running away,” to a different person?

**Mike:** The talk that Sharon said—we actually sat her down and said: “No matter what you do, if you’re in God’s family, He would never abandon you. No matter what you do to us—if you don’t talk to us, if you don’t hug us, if you walk away from us—we’re still going to love you. You can’t stop us from loving you. Ha; ha!” [Laughter]

**Dennis:** Well, now again, all of this sounds really kind of perfect, here, talking about it in a studio; but in the heat of the moment, when there’s an emotional meltdown or a child that just maybe gets violent, physically or emotionally, against parents or against their siblings, that demands a lot of the parents. Have you ever had to deal with anything like that?

**Mike:** A little bit; yes. The idea that I told you about—where someone would just kind of run away or leave—it was going to be dangerous. I had to, literally, pick them up and carry them back in the house, and lock the door, and sit in front of the door and say, “If you go out there on that road, who knows who could pick you up,” or whatever.

We had some of those but nothing—I can honestly say nothing that was really extreme. That, maybe, is just God looking out for us, and keeping His eye on our family, and giving us a little extra dose of blessing.
Bob: Have there been days, Sharon, when you’ve been so overwhelmed that you thought, “I don’t know that I have the capacity for this”?

Sharon: There have been days when I’ve wanted to take a very long nap, by myself.

Bob: Yes?

Dennis: Ever lose heart? I mean, the Scriptures are real clear—in Galatians, it says, “Don’t lose heart in well-doing for in due time you shall reap.”

Sharon: I think the key is I really felt God called us to this. I really felt that He was in it, from the beginning. When you know that, you know there might be hard times; but you feel like He’s going to take you out the other end.

Mike: I have an altered view of all of this. I submit that a lot of people walk around every day—and they’re living what would be called the American dream—but they know they’re kind of in neutral—waking up, having their coffee, going to work, coming home, have dinner, watch their favorite TV show—and it’s not that challenging; but it’s a little hard, and then you do it again.

When you enter God’s will in such a way that He starts revealing amazing stories and blessings, and you travel, and you see lives changed—you see people come to the Lord because of what they see your children saying or doing—or you see this ripple effect that starts to kick in—you, actually, sort of come more alive. It reminds me of, “If you lose your life, you’ll gain it,” and “If you gain your life, you’ll lose it.” There’s something sort of scary about that middle place, where you’re just in neutral.

Dennis: Comfort is a dangerous—

Mike: Comfort will kill you!

Dennis: It will.

Sharon: It will.

Dennis: And your faith won’t grow in the midst of, you know, a Lazy Boy® recliner.

Sharon: Absolutely.

Bob: But I’m just wondering, “Do you remember, Mike, when it started to dawn on you that ‘God’s up to something here that is bigger than just our family. He’s going to use these kids and what’s happening here to advance His kingdom’?”

Mike: It slowly dawned on me. I’m a little slow on the draw sometimes, but the last year has been a year of rich and amazing blessings. We kind of were our own quiet little
selves for 17 years. The last six months, God pressed the turbo button and has decided to just unleash the story—and let us be part of the story, which has been amazing.

**Bob:** Some of that’s because of George—and the fact that he plays guitar, and cello, and piano with his feet.

**Mike:** Yes.

**Bob:** We’ve seen YouTube® videos of him. He’s got a beautiful voice, by the way. Even if he couldn’t play—just put a microphone in front of him—he’s got a beautiful voice.

**Dennis:** Yes; yes.

**Bob:** But he’s leading worship in churches. Tell us about Romania, because he was born in Romania.

**Sharon:** Right.

**Bob:** He’s now a minor celebrity in Romania; right?

**Sharon:** He is. They invited him back to be on a television show when they saw his video. The idea was they would have him reunite with his biological family on television. It was an amazing three days we spent with the family. I felt like his mother and I had this special bond—we were holding hands—we had our arms around each other. I think that’s only something that happens with the Holy Spirit. There wasn’t that mother competition or that mother jealousy. It was: “We both love this boy. God has a plan for him, and we’re both making it happen.”

**Dennis:** I want you to comment on something that George symbolizes—but also, I guess every one of your children, in some way, does—and that is—we tend to look at a handicap as something that limits a child. What have you seen in your children that demonstrates the power of what God’s up to in a human life, who may be born with a handicap or a disability?

**Sharon:** I always think of that verse in Corinthians that says, “He uses the foolish things to confound the wise, and He uses the weak things to confound the strong.” I really feel like He does that with our children. He created them, and He had that purpose in mind—that they would be able to show people things they wouldn’t see otherwise.

**Bob:** George, for example, and I guess James, as well—no arms—but they both drive, and they drive cars that are not specially-equipped.

**Mike:** Correct.

**Bob:** How’s this work? How do you get the keys out of the pocket? [Laughter] Seriously!
**Dennis:** What’s your insurance bill? [Laughter]

**Mike:** Very, very large! [Laughter]

**Dennis:** Yes!

**Bob:** How would George get in the car? What does he do?

**Mike:** God sent a lovely young lady to visit us. Her name is Jessica Cox, and she was born with no arms. She’s the only registered pilot in the world—she flies a plane with her feet. She has a black belt. She came to visit our area. She showed George and James the plane—how she flew it. She took us on a magical journey about possibilities.

Then, she said, “I want to go visit you at your house.” We all hopped in, and she was driving down the highway. She said to me: “Oh, no. Don’t get adaptations for George and James. Picture this in the future—they’ll want to go somewhere. They’ll go up to the Hertz Rent-a-Car counter, and they’ll need a specially-equipped car. They won’t be able to travel. You want to have them use everything normal.” She gave me this motivational talk. I said: “She’s right! They can do it.” She said, “Watch me,” and she started teaching them as they watched her do it. They got motivated.

**Bob:** So she uses / they use left foot for gas and brake—

**Mike:** Correct.

**Bob:** —and steers with the right foot?

**Mike:** Yes.

**Bob:** So does that mean you’re knee is sticking over into the passenger compartment? I’m trying to get a picture of this.

**Mike:** Yes; I mean, there’s a little bit of that; but they, obviously, couldn’t use their left foot to steer because the door and the window would block you.

**Dennis:** Right.

**Mike:** So, they had to go to the right; and with the right, you’ve got a lot more ability to kind of—

**Bob:** And if you’ve got to do a sharp turn—they can do that?
Mike: Oh, yes! They do quite well. It’s funny—the lady who taught them to drive said to each of them, “I feel a little safer with you guys than with my own daughter.” [Laughter] I think she was half-joking, but it was funny.

Bob: Keys?—they can put the keys in the ignition and turn them?

Mike: Yes; then think about putting on your own seatbelt—they both do that.

Bob: Wow!

Mike: It’s interesting; yes. They get a lot of—our police station gets a lot of phone calls: “There’s this crazy kid driving with his feet!”

Dennis: What special abilities have you seen, as a result of—you have one daughter who has no arms or legs. You’re, undoubtedly, seeing certain things emerge in her. What special abilities—mentally, emotionally, spiritually—do you see in her?

Sharon: Yes; she just has an amazing mind. She’s a smart girl, and she knows how to tell people what she wants because she has to. You know, she can’t do a lot for herself; so we’re teaching her to do it politely rather than order us around. [Laughter]

Bob: So, how might she speak her mind? Give me an example of what might be the way she does it today.

Sharon: “Mom! My hair’s in my face, and it’s going to get in my food!” “Mom! Quick, I have an itch. Scratch my back!”

Bob: Okay; got it. So—

Sharon: So we say, “You had some nannies in Thailand that were paid to take care of you, but I’m your mom; so you need to ask nicely.” [Laughter] She’s learning that. [Laughter]

Dennis: And could you see how God might use her when she becomes an adult—and how He may take that limitation and just declare a certain aspect of who He is through her?

Mike: Yes; we were talking about Nick V.—I always mess up his last name; I apologize—he’s a shining example of that. If anyone’s ever had a chance to hear about Nick—Nick was born with no arms and no legs. His full-time role now is to travel the world and share the gospel. He tells everybody, “If God had given me arms and legs, I wouldn’t be here talking to you today.” I could see that happening with Hope, as well; and George is doing it, now.
**Dennis:** She could be telling people what to do—say, “Here’s about your relationship with God.” [Laughter]

**Sharon:** She’s very bold!

**Mike:** Yes; “I order you to accept Christ!”

**Sharon:** I need to share an example of that, actually, because—and this is a little plug for the _Jesus_ film also—I try to get a copy of the _Jesus_ film in whatever language my child has when they come to us, if they’re an older child. We got the Thai version of the kids’ _Jesus_ film.

We showed it to her when she first arrived. She immediately got it. The Holy Spirit had worked on her; and she said, “I love Jesus, and I want Jesus!” Then she got sad; and she said: “But I’m Thai. I’m not allowed; I have to be a Buddhist.” I explained to her that, “That’s not true,” and that she could love Jesus. Once she realized that, she wanted to go back to Thailand and tell everyone about Jesus. She’s got that—she wants to tell people.

**Bob:** May God open doors, around the world, for her to tell people that: “You don’t have to be a Buddhist. You can trust Christ.”

**Sharon:** That’s right; that’s right.

**Dennis:** It will be interesting to see what the rest of the story is there.

**Mike:** To be determined.

**Bob:** That’s right. yes.

**Dennis:** And it will be determined—you know it will be.

**Mike:** Yes; it already is.

**Dennis:** Tell us about James. He has no arms; he’s from India. He’s now 16; is that right?

**Mike:** Yes; he’s driving. He is academically-inclined, unlike his brother. We had this idealistic vision that, because George and James both had no arms, they would be best friends for life—and share every thought and idea, and pal up and do things, and help each other. They _do not_ get along so well. [Laughter]

**Bob:** You thought they’d be twins!
Mike: Yes; their personalities are completely opposite. They’re both amazing people, but they are like Yin and Yang. James is academic—

Bob: Well, now—wait, wait, wait! I’ve got to tell you—Dennis had sons, who were two years apart,—

Dennis: Oh, yes! I’m just wondering how they fought—how your boys fought. [Laughter]

Mike: Oh, yes! James—James—you’ve got to hear this one because it’s kind of comical. James would say to George, “If you keep messing with me, you’re gonna get a heeling!” Usually, a healing is a good thing. When James wails on George, it’s with the back of his feet. He gets him on the ground and then pounds him.

Bob: A heel-ing! [Laughter] I get it!—with the heel! [Laughter]

Mike: So, in our house, if you hear, “Next time you do this, you’re getting a heeling!” it’s not a good thing. [Laughter]

Dennis: You know, the principle is—boys are going to find a way to wrestle, whether they have any arms or legs. [Laughter]

Mike: Exactly!

Dennis: It’s going to happen!

Bob: And the good news is your sons get along today; don’t they?

Dennis: Oh, yes. We’re planning a golf trip together.

Bob: I just want to give you some hope that it could be that James and George and you are all best friends before long.

Sharon: I believe it; yes.

Mike: It will happen.

Dennis: You know, I think the lesson to take away from the Dennehys is just to look at their example and then say, “What’s my assignment when it comes to the orphan?” It doesn’t mean you need to adopt. It doesn’t mean you need to become a foster care parent. It doesn’t mean you need to go to an orphanage in a far-away country; but you do need to go near the orphan somehow/someway—either through prayer, through giving—maybe, physically.

I have to say that there has not been a time when I have gone near the orphan that I haven’t felt like I’ve gone near the heart of God. I’ll never forget a moment in Beijing,
China. There was a young lady, who was blind. She was, I think, 17 or 18. Some extended family members were using her to make money on the street corners, because her voice was that of an angel.

Somehow, she found her way to this orphanage, where they provided protection and safety for her. She became a follower of Christ and gave her life to Christ. We didn’t know the language of Mandarin, but she sang *Jesus Loves Me* to us. I’m going to tell you—there wasn’t a dry eye among all of the adults—

**Sharon:** I bet; yes.

**Dennis:** —because it was the voice of an angel, in another language—but a human being, who reflects the image of God. I just think—when you go near the orphan, you *think* you go near them to help them; but God ends up touching *you*.

**Sharon:** Absolutely!

**Bob:** You know, our team, here, at FamilyLife®, has worked hard to try to provide families with resources and help. If you’re thinking about/you’re praying about how you can help the orphan—whether it’s through adoption, foster care, helping to support an orphanage in another country, providing respite care for adoptive or foster parents in your church—there are all kinds of ways that you can be a part of helping to love and to care for orphans. Go to our website, FamilyLifeToday.com; and we’ve got links available there that can provide you with help.

If this is an area that God has put on your heart, again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com to explore the resources that are available; and get a copy of Dr. Russell Moore’s book, which is called *Adopted for Life*. It provides us with a *great* foundation for thinking *rightly* about adoption in our world and in our churches. Again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com, where all of these resources are available. You can order Dr. Moore’s book from us, online; or you can call to order at 1-800-FL-TODAY—1-800-358-6329—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life and then the word, “TODAY.”

By the way, I just want to add here that, since we had this conversation with the Dennehys, George is now married and is the father of a four-year-old son. God continues to have His hand on George, and on the Dennehys, and on their kids.

You know, when we worked on the movie that FamilyLife had in theaters, back, a few months ago—the movie, *Like Arrows*—we wanted to include a family that had an adoption story as a part of their family; because it’s something that we care deeply about, here, at FamilyLife. I mention the *Like Arrows* movie because we’ve had a lot of people saying, “When is that going to be available on DVD?” We now have the date. You can get it on DVD, or get it through Amazon® or iTunes® on February 5th—that’s when it’s going to be available.
We have a limited number of copies of the DVD that are now available. We’re making those available to those of you who can help FamilyLife with a yearend donation. This is a critical time of year for our ministry; and we’ve had some friends of the ministry, who have come to us and offered to match every donation we receive this month, dollar for dollar, up to a total of what is now $3 million—it was $2.5 million; we’ve just had some additional funds released into that matching-gift fund.

When we hear from you, whatever donation you make, we’re able to access new funds from that matching-gift fund. We’re hoping to take full advantage of it. To do that, we’re going to need to hear from listeners, like you. We want challenge you to go online today to make a yearend donation to support this ministry, or call 1-800-FL-TODAY to donate. Again, we’ll send you a copy of the Like Arrows DVD when you make a yearend donation; and your donation will be doubled. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com to donate, or call us at 1-800-FL-TODAY.

And be sure to join us back tomorrow. We want to talk about some of the reasons why it can be so difficult for families, who want to adopt, to actually be able to adopt. Mike and Sharon Dennehy will join us again tomorrow. I hope you can be here as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

*FamilyLife Today* is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas; a Cru® Ministry. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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