

BOUNDARIES

Steven Lefebvre

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for June 16–22, 2014.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

(Watch video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91GhJguRbG4&feature=youtu.be>)

MEET THE WRITER

My name is **Steven Lefebvre**. I work with the youth and young adults at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Before working at a church, I was the lead vocalist in a hardcore band. These days, I spend my free time being an armchair film critic, reading comic books, and playing much quieter music (well, sort of). I’m also an amateur champion of darts and dodge ball. I’m a huge fan of going to baseball games in the summer and to college basketball games in the winter. You can read my blog at www.stevenlefebvre.blogspot.com.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- pruning sheers
- an overgrown bush

PLUGGED IN

- + *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, by Eugene Peterson; IVP Books, 2000
(<http://www.amazon.com/Long-Obedience-Same-Direction-Discipleship/dp/0830822577>)

CHECKING IN

We’re taking this session outside. See if you can locate an overgrown, preferably flowering, bush or shrub. The point of this exercise is to have a conversation about the necessity of pruning. If you don’t know, here’s why: The need for pruning goes way beyond cosmetics. When a plant becomes overgrown with weak and thin branches, it requires more nutrients to maintain itself. The first sign of overgrowth is puny flowers and tiny fruit. A good gardener knows to locate the smaller branches and to remove them to preserve the healthier branches. Pruning allows the roots, the nutrient grabbers, to grow thicker.

Encourage your group to locate the small branches on the bush or shrub and to discuss which ones need to come off of the plant. Prune the shrub. When you've cut a significant amount of growth away, invite discussion:

How does the plant look now? Does it look better? butchered?

What's more important—the way the plant looks or its ability to produce fruit or flowers?

How do you think the plant will respond to the pruning?

How are our ambition and our desires to be accepted and loved like this plant?

What does it mean for us to be pruned, to be cut back, to have boundaries that signify what is and is not healthy?

In what ways does God prune, trim, or cut us back in order to accomplish greater good?

EXPLORING THE WORD

Scripture: John 15:5–8

I've often heard that John 15:5–8 means if you don't believe in Jesus, you'll go to hell—which, I suppose, is one way to think about it. However, after our little landscaping activity, I want to offer a different perspective.

Remember that cutting back a plant doesn't kill the plant; it saves it. When the branches stretch too far out from the root, they steal nutrients and water from the roots and other branches. In John 15:5–8, Jesus is telling his followers not to grow too far from the roots or he will cut us back, which is good because then the whole community of the faithful will thrive.

Have you ever felt shame? What was it about? Did you do something you weren't supposed to? Did you get caught doing something embarrassing? Were you rejected? At the heart of shame is desire. Our ultimate desire as human beings is to be loved and cared for. The good news is that ultimately what Jesus is offering to the world is love. The bad news is that sometimes we get mixed messages from our culture and go looking for love in other places: popularity, pornography, shopping, overeating, under-eating, alcohol, and so on.

But the story doesn't end there. Jesus doesn't abandon us. So periodically when we're looking for love in all the wrong ways, we get caught. A parent reads our Internet history. Our credit card gets maxed out. We hurt someone close to us.

Jesus intervenes to cut back the wandering branch. This is what is happening when we feel shame. This is the nakedness Adam and Eve felt in the Garden of Eden. Shame is the feeling we get when we feel exposed, when our bad behavior is unveiled as a misguided pursuit of satisfying our deepest desires.

Shame isn't always a good thing. Sometimes, the enemy gets to us before Jesus; instead of being humbled, we get defensive or worse, we start to hate ourselves. The question is this: *Whose voice are we listening to?* Are we paying attention to the voice of humility or the voice of pride or self-

hatred? One voice is Jesus, leading us on a path to wholeness. The other is not and leads us on a cycle of constantly being cut down.

Remember, being pruned, trimmed, cut back, and shaped is a good thing because Jesus' desire is to give us grace, not punishment. When we feel shame and choose to embrace humility, we put ourselves in a position to receive God's healing grace. This is the most wonderful gift of all.

Discuss:

When have you felt deep shame? What did you get caught doing? What do you think you really wanted?

What's the difference between saying or thinking "I made a mistake" and "I am a mistake"? In what ways is one humility and the other pride?

If everyone makes mistakes, why is it hard to admit our own? How is being extra hard on ourselves a form of arrogance?

SHARING IN PRAYER

Invite group members to pray with you.

"O God, who resists the proud and gives grace to the humble: grant us the virtue of true humility, where of Your Only-begotten son showed in Himself a pattern for Your faithful; that we may never by our pride provoke Your anger, but rather by our meekness receive the riches of Your grace. Amen."

TAKING IT FURTHER

Confession is always the best choice when confronted with shame, yet the prospect of confession can be terrifying to contemplate. This exercise is designed to help young people practice confession. Invite group members to think about a sin that they have committed for which they are truly sorry. Then ask them to write on slips of paper brief descriptions of their sins, encouraging them to be as honest and as brave as possible. Assure them that what they write will remain between them and God. When everyone is finished, collect all the papers in the box. One at a time, take them out, crumple them up, and burn them in a metal container (with a top for safety). Offer a prayer for the group, asking God's forgiveness for these and all your sins. Then assure group members that their sins are forgiven. Be available to anyone who wants to talk further about this experience with you; or encourage group members to talk with a trusted mentor, church leader, or sponsor.