Stepping Up Behind Bars: A Chaplain’s Story

Guest: Bruce Cunningham
From the series: A New Kind of Freedom (Day 2 of 3)
Air date: July 22, 2014

Bob: Bruce Cunningham has worked with prisoners in state prisons for more than two decades. He says that, along with the gospel, there is another very significant message that men in prison need to hear.

Bruce: If there’s one thing these men need—it is the knowledge of how to be a man. Their dads weren’t there—and their dad is the number one guy that says, “You’re a man now,”—they don’t hear it, and they need to know it. They need to know what that looks like. That’s exactly what Stepping Up® does.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, July 22nd. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. We’ll talk with prison chaplain Bruce Cunningham today about how he is calling men in prison to step up. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Tuesday edition. Dennis—

Dennis: Bob, do you know any prisoners?

Bob: I’ve met a few.

Dennis: Yes?

Bob: I’m trying to think of whom—I mean, I don’t know if I know anybody in prison today. I’ve met guys who have been in and are out.

Dennis: Well, let me just remind you of one that you know.

Bob: Okay.

Dennis: “For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation”—and he goes on to talk about his testimony.

Bob: I guess I do feel like I know him, yes—that’s right.
Dennis: I know—I know a prisoner! [Laughter] And we’ve got a friend with us—a new friend with us today—Bruce Cunningham, who joins us again on FamilyLife Today—who has met a few prisoners in his lifetime. [Laughter] Bruce, welcome back.

Bruce: Thank you, sir.

Dennis: Bruce, how many prisoners, as a chaplain, do you think you’ve known over your 25 years in California and in the state of Arkansas, working with prisoners?

Bruce: I’ve never taken the time to tabulate that.

Dennis: A rough estimate.

Bruce: Thousands—actually, thousands. Probably—oh, gosh—three or four thousand anyway.

Dennis: You and your wife have six kids.

Bruce: Yes.

Dennis: You’ve got three grandchildren.

Bruce: Yes.

Dennis: You’re a chaplain at Wrightsville Prison, here in the state of Arkansas.

Bob: And explain for our listeners—is that a medium-security / is it a state prison?

Bruce: It’s minimum- to medium-security. It’s a state prison. It’s the closest one in Arkansas to the city of Little Rock.

Bob: And the guys are in Wrightsville—it’s all guys; right?

Bruce: Well, Wrightsville Prison is actually a complex. At Wrightsville itself, there are 850 men. Next-door is the Hawkins Unit, and there are 200 men and 200 women.

Bob: Okay.

Bruce: And, then—up in Little Rock itself—we have a barracks full of men up there as well.

Bob: And the guys in Wrightsville—what kinds of crimes? Is it a full-range of crimes that they might have committed?
Bruce: The full range—everything you can imagine—they’ve done.

Bob: Okay.

Dennis: Run through some.

Bruce: We have people that have committed murder; rape, robbery—you name it.

Dennis: Drugs?

Bruce: Yes, drug salesmen.

Dennis: Embezzlement?

Bruce: Embezzlement. You just run down the gamut of what they’ve done—they’ve done it.

Dennis: Yes. You know, this is going to be impossible; but introduce our audience to your favorite prisoner out of all of them you’ve known over all these years. [Laughter] Bob hates these questions because he sequentially goes—

Bob: You’ve got to go through 4,000—

Dennis: —“That means you have he’s got to review them all!

Bruce: My favorite prisoner? Oh, my goodness. Wow! That’s a rough one because I have known a number of them whom I have been impressed with. I’ve known a number of them who are absolutely a beautiful example of Christianity.

So, it’s hard for me to single one out to be honest with you. One thing I will say about them is—that if you are an inmate and you are able to go, let’s say, one full year without a disciplinary write-up for whatever—for talking back, or for breaking a rule, or for something of that nature—you have shown a tremendous amount of humility and of self-control.

Bob: Yes.

Bruce: I’ve seen a lot of inmates who’ve done a great job of that. They’re quite mature in many respects—from a biblical standpoint. They have self-control. They know how to control their tongues. Now, I’m not going to say that all inmates are like that because they’re not. Most inmates are really dealing with a lot of immaturity issues, but I have known a few who’ve done a fantastic job of walking in a mature manner, and knowing when to speak, and when not to speak, and things of that nature.
**Dennis:** We talked, earlier, about how you grew up in a home where you had an alcoholic father who was violent. You had your own set of regrets, as a dad.

**Bruce:** Indeed.

**Dennis:** You were a father to six and, at the same time, you’re ministering to hundreds and thousands of these inmates—

**Bruce:** Yes.

**Dennis:** —who had no father at all. You said over 75 percent had virtually no father-figure in their life whatsoever.

**Bruce:** Correct.

**Dennis:** And over a period of time, you became aware of how important it was to paint a vision of what manhood—biblical manhood / a Christ-following man—looks like for these inmates. We were talking to you about how you came across *Stepping Up*—

**Bruce:** Yes, sir.

**Dennis:** —and ended up deciding to bring it to Wrightsville Prison.

**Bruce:** Indeed.

**Dennis:** Take us back to how you found out about it.

**Bruce:** Yes, sir. Well, I recognized that, not only was I interested in getting this kind of knowledge into the inmates from the Word of God, but actually I had a unique opportunity to do so like very few others have the opportunity. It just so happened that one of the—since we’re close to the Little Rock area, one of the employees at FamilyLife became a volunteer at the prison to assist me.

His name is Don Averill. He and I became good friends. He and another man from FamilyLife, named Tom Steinen, both came down to volunteer their time every Sunday night to run a prayer meeting in our chapel so the inmates have a place to come and pray. We have a prayer base for all of our chapel activities and what have you.

Don Averill and I became friends. I began to tell him my vision—to let him know: “You know, Don, I really want for these men to be taught from the Word of God what it means to be a man. They need infrastructure for the family. They need to know what marriage actually looks like from God’s perspective. They need to know what it means to raise children after the biblical fashion. They have no clue what that looks like—most of them.”
I told Don: “I know that FamilyLife champions a lot of curriculum / a lot of material. FamilyLife is very involved in training God’s people about relationships,”—it just kind of made sense to look to this resource. He introduced Stepping Up to me, and he invited us over to FamilyLife. We sat down and looked over the Stepping Up material. I instantly knew that this was what we needed for the inmates because it was speaking the exact words that I wanted to say to the inmates for years now.

I took the Stepping Up trailer that we have—that advertises it—and I showed it to the inmates during our weekly services for about three weeks so word began to spread around. I began to make announcements regularly that we were going to have this curriculum beginning in January.

**Dennis:** This is a prison of about 850 men.

**Bruce:** Eight hundred fifty men—we get about 100 each week in service, roughly, for our weekly services—Christian services. We ended up with 260 of them that wanted to go through Stepping Up. The warden said: “Well, we can't get 260 inmates in the same place at the same time. So, we need to do half of the institution the first ten weeks and the other half of the institution the second ten weeks,”—which we were glad to do.

We had a group of volunteers called Grace without Borders that come every week and do small men's groups anyway. So, we asked for them to come and assist us every Thursday night to do it. Additionally, in our PAL program—PAL stands for “Principles and Application for Life”—we decided to include Stepping Up in the curriculum—the regular annual curriculum for PAL program as well.

The first ten weeks, we graduated 92 inmates—out of a little over 100 that were able to come to the first ten weeks. The reason not all of them graduated is because many times they get transferred out and go to other facilities or they get transferred to the other side of the facility, where they weren't eligible to come, and things of that nature. We had 92 graduates.

**Bob:** So, once a week, the guys are getting together and watching the videos. I just have to ask you—because the first video's talking about, “What’s the most courageous thing you've ever done, as a man?”

**Bruce:** Right.

**Bob:** We’re walking through this whole idea of stepping from adolescence into manhood,—

**Bruce:** Right.
Bob: —into being a mentor, and then a patriarch. Session Four, we go inside a prison and hear from a prisoner. What kind of feedback were you getting from the guys as they were going, week by week, through this material?

Bruce: Well, the guys, first of all, fell in love with it immediately, as was evidenced by the fact that they kept coming every week. They very much enjoyed the small group environment, where they were able to kind of communicate about a subject that’s near and dear to all of them.

Dennis: They really did that? I mean, they really got into the nitty gritty of their lives?

Bruce: They got into it—they really did! We had, I don’t know, 11 or 12 small groups, sitting around the room, after each video each week. They were—what we did is—we had some of our inmates from the PAL program were facilitating each group—kind of guiding discussion / keeping it on track. We had inmates, who were not Christians at all, who came to the Stepping Up program because they wanted to know about fatherhood.

Bob: Yes.

Bruce: That’s really the drawing power of it. It wasn’t so much the Christian thing as much as it was fatherhood: "What does it look like to be a dad?" They came. We had Islamic inmates that were there, sitting in the group. They were engaged, and they stayed the entire ten weeks; you know? A number of the inmates expressed that now they had a greater confidence whenever they speak with their wives—they had a greater confidence in what was going to happen with their children. Some of them made a decision to kind of grab hope that they’re able to piece their family back together again after they get back out.

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: Yes, that was one of the things that surprised me—as we listened to the testimony of these guys, or as they grabbed my hand or I shook theirs, or gave them a hug—men were talking about how they were already taking their sons—their teen-aged sons—through this material.

Bob: Wait! Guys, who are in prison, are doing this with their teenaged sons? How does that work?

Bruce: Well, we managed to get our hands on an extra set of curriculum, which one of the brothers from FamilyLife was kind enough to donate because he found out about one of our inmates who specifically wanted his son to go through it. He pulled—out of his own pocket—and paid for it and sent it to us. We got permission from the Deputy Warden, and that inmate was able to mail that to his son.
The inmates are able to talk with their family members on the phone, provided they have money on the books to do it and that sort of thing, and at the proper time, and what have you. So, he was communicating with his wife and communicating with his son, who is now in his mid-twenties. He’s training his son through the *Stepping Up* curriculum—now that he already went through it, now he’s training his son how to train *his* son. That was powerful. That goes right to the core of what I was hoping for from the very beginning.

**Dennis:** Yes, because they needed all of the help and hope they could get.

**Bruce:** Absolutely!

**Dennis:** Others were talking about how it was changing—and this stunned me—they stood up and talked about how this was changing their relationship with their wives.

**Bruce:** Yes, absolutely!—absolutely.

**Dennis:** Explain how that happens.

**Bruce:** Many times, when inmates come to prison, their relationship in their marriage usually isn’t all that great anyway—very often. After they’ve been down for a while, many times, they’ll get a “Dear John” letter. Their wives will say, “I’m moving on with my life.” Those wives that do hang in there with them—it’s a strained relationship because they’re, legally, separated. No matter how you look at it, they’re not able to really come together and really interact.

She is dealing with a lot of concerns at home—raising the kids, and dealing with the bills, and trying to work, and make it work. She doesn’t have her husband with her, and that really frustrates her. So there’s a lot of tension in the marriage very often. *Stepping Up* gave a lot of the inmates the courage and, for that matter, the knowledge of how to communicate with their wife from a different perspective—to recognize what their wives have need of—and to recognize that they have a responsibility to their wives, even if they can’t be there physically / they can be there emotionally for their wives. A lot of them expressed recognition that: “Wow! This is what I need to be doing.”

Fatherhood is, by God’s design, an *amazing* institution. It goes right to the core of God’s plan, not only for the family, but for the entire society. Anytime that we build the knowledge of what that institution looks like and we help men—especially in this cross-section of society, who are behind bars—when they find out what it means / what their role is, it actually empowers them. They are like, “Wow! I have the ability to do this.” They’re not discouraged anymore. So, a lot of marriage relationships started to come back together again.

**Bob:** You brought a letter with you. What does the letter say?
Bruce: Well, I brought a few. One from an inmate who said, “The Stepping Up curriculum has really affected my life in a positive way. When the question came up, ‘What’s the most courageous thing you’ve ever done?’ I gained confidence in God. I felt encouraged to be that man He calls us all to be. Doing the right thing and being that man God calls us to be is not very popular in prison; but after watching the Stepping Up video and seeing good examples of successful men and great fathers, I then made a decision I will step up and be a father and that man God created me to be. I start now. That’s the most courageous thing I’ve ever done.”

Another inmate—that we have a testimony concerning—his wife left him and sent him a “goodbye” letter. She is in a relationship with another man. After being in Stepping Up, he has decided to try to make the marriage work because he knows God does not want him to divorce, even if it’s not him who initiates it. That’s pretty courageous!

Bob: You are, right now, taking the second set of guys through the Stepping Up materials.

Bruce: Correct; yes, sir.

Bob: Are you seeing anything different the second time around than what happened the first time?

Bruce: It’s very much the same results. The guys, who are going through it this second time around, are having the same response to—well, I say curriculum / that’s prison terminology, I guess—the program / the videos are very empowering. Just like they do out in the community—for men in the community—they do for men inside the prison as well.

Bob: Each guy has got a workbook.

Bruce: Correct.

Bob: So he can take that back—he can read the articles that are in there. That’s where the discussion questions are that the guys do in the small groups.

Bruce: Yes, sir.

Bob: I’m just wondering if you’re seeing any difference in the way guys are interacting with one another, following going through the material?

Bruce: Yes, we are. One of the things that I’m glad that we chose to do—and we didn’t really think it through ahead of time / we just did it—their small groups that they would meet together in each Thursday night, when they would go through Stepping Up, most of them in that small group came from the same barracks where they live—that’s where their bed is at.
So, not only were they doing the small groups together on Thursday nights, but they would go back to the barracks and have interaction in the barracks as well. After *Stepping Up* came to our prison, chapel attendance skyrocketed. Additionally, we had a number of baptisms occur. Inmates were excited about coming to Christ. Many of them had walked away from church when they were in their early teenage years. They’ve come to realize that Jesus wasn’t the problem, at the time; you know? It’s really exciting to see what’s happening as a result!

**Dennis:** So do you think there’ll be any more guys that want to go through this after you finish with the next batch of 125 or so guys?

**Bruce:** I have no doubt about that. There are a number of new inmates coming to Wrightsville who’ve never been there before. We pick up about 50 every month. Additionally, there are a lot of guys who didn’t choose to go through it initially; but now, they’re saying, “I’d like to go through it.”

We will do *Stepping Up* every year in our PAL program. There are 17 barracks at Wrightsville. One of those barracks is specifically for the Chaplain to oversee with the PAL program and what have you—where we use biblical curriculum to guide the men into better principles for their lifestyle. We’ve decided to add this to the curriculum because it goes right to the core of what they have need of.

**Bob:** And some of the other chaplains in Arkansas—at other facilities—are starting to say, “Maybe we need to do this in our prison”?

**Bruce:** That’s correct. I’ve had a couple of them already express interest with me. They got hold of me, after they’d found out what we’d done and what have you. They got hold of me and said, “Hey, I need that down here, as well.”

**Bob:** And it’s cool because there are local churches that are saying, “Well, we’ll sponsor that or help make that happen.” There are community organizations—I mean, we’re starting to see—and Dennis, this is nothing that we sat down and said: “Boy, we need to get this into prisons. Here’s a strategy for how to do this”; right?

**Dennis:** Yes. In fact, one of the things that happened, after I came back from Wrightsville and the graduation ceremony—

**Bruce:** Yes.

**Dennis:** —that you put together—I had a letter from a guy near Spokane, Washington,—

**Bruce:** Yes.
**Dennis:**—who was in a unit there, who said, “Would you donate a *Stepping Up* series for some men?” He said: “I can make some guys go to this thing! [Laughter] I can get them there!” I think this is a ready-made ministry for a group of men who would like to step up.

Bruce, coach a man, right now, who is listening—maybe it’s a young man—and he’s going: “You know what? I could see myself doing—not what Bruce does full-time, as a chaplain—but maybe just beginning to do what you did—which is kind of volunteer, and come alongside a chaplain, and maybe take *Stepping Up* into a prison.” Coach him in how that might work. I know states are different, but how should he go about it?

**Bruce:** Well, all of prison ministry—in almost every state that I know about how chaplaincy works—revolves around the State Chaplain. The State Chaplain is pretty much the gatekeeper for the ministry inside the facility. If there is a brother in the Lord, at some church out in the community, and he knows of a prison not too far away from him, the best thing for him to do is try to contact that chaplain and say, “I know of some curriculum / a program that would really be a blessing to the men inside the prison.”

To be honest with you, from my perspective—and I’ve been a State Chaplain for 14 years—it looks, to me, like *Stepping Up* was created specifically for prisoners. That’s the way it looks to me. I know it wasn’t the target audience, like you said earlier; but to me, it looks like that’s who it was written for. It’s hitting right on the mark of the need inside the prison.

If there’s one thing these men need—it is the knowledge of how to be a man. Their dads weren’t there—and their dad is the number one guy that says, “You’re a man now.” They don’t hear it, and they need to know it. They need to know what that looks like. That’s exactly what *Stepping Up* does—inside the prison—is where it needs to be.

**Dennis:** One of the—well, I’d have to say the *most* powerful things for me in participating in graduation for the 93 guys who graduated at Wrightsville—when we went down and, as you know, spent the evening with you there with the prisoners—was standing in line, and shaking hands, and hugging every man who came through that line who received his certificate of graduation.

**Bruce:** Yes.

**Dennis:** I determined, when I went in there, to shake their hands and *hug them*—

**Bruce:** Yes.

**Dennis:**—man to man / beard to beard—

**Bruce:** Yes, sir.
Dennis: —and look them in the eye and say, “I’m proud of you.”

Bruce: Yes, sir.

Dennis: You don’t have any idea what that means, but I just wanted them to know that I cared and here were other men who cared as well. I know, from having spoken at the Weekend to Remember® marriage getaways that we do, all over the country, Bruce—

Bruce: Yes.

Dennis: —that after I’ve spoken on the dad talk, I’ve had men come and wait in line for 20/30 minutes to say: “Would you just hug me? My dad never hugged me.”

Bruce: I can believe that.

Dennis: “Would you just hug me?”

Bruce: Yes.

Dennis: Given where those prisoners came from, I’d bet a lot of them needed a hug.

I just want to say to you—Bruce, you’re a hero.

Bruce: Well, I appreciate that. I really do.

Dennis: You’re a hero for facing your own inadequacies, as a dad, and admitting that—but not wallowing in pity—and seeking to be a difference-maker in your own kids’ lives still, as adult children, and making a difference in the lives of literally hundreds and thousands of prisoners. I just want to thank you for your work.

Bruce: Well, I’m grateful. I appreciate you. I think that, when you went to shake all of the prisoners’ hands and give them a hug, that was a powerful statement to them. They do need that, and I’ve been a dad to a lot of inmates. It is part of what I do, and it’s a joy to do it. I’m really grateful for that encouragement.

Dennis: Yes, that was for one evening for me. You’re giving your life to it. I just want to say, “Thanks.”

Bruce: Thank you, sir.

Bob: Yes, and I hope—I don’t know if you’ve seen this yet, Bruce—but I hope our listeners will go get a glimpse of what happened in that one evening when we did go down to Wrightsville Prison for the graduation ceremony from the Stepping Up event. The video is up at FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the link that says, “GO DEEPER.” You’ll see the video right there. Again, the website is FamilyLifeToday.com. It’s the graduation
ceremony of the *Stepping Up* graduation that took place at the Wrightsville Prison, back a few months ago.

I just want to add a “Thank you,” Dennis, to the folks who support *FamilyLife Today*—because your support is what makes stuff like this happen. We’re a listener-supported ministry. Chaplain Cunningham doesn’t have a whole lot of money in his budget. We were able to come together and take the resources that our listeners had helped us develop with the *Stepping Up* series and get them into the Wrightsville Prison. Our listeners helped make that possible. We appreciate your financial support of this ministry, as donors.

If you are interested in getting the *Stepping Up* material into a prison near where you live, or if you’d like for your church to get involved in taking this material to a local prison, we’ve got information on our website at FamilyLifeToday.com about how to explore that opportunity in your state. It is different, state by state but we kind of mapped out “Here Are the Steps to Follow” to figure out how you could get this material into a prison near where you live. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click the link that says, “GO DEEPER,” to find out more about that.

If you’d like to use the *Stepping Up* video series with men you know in your church, or in your community, or in your neighborhood, again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com. The information is there about how you can order the video series and the workbooks. FamilyLifeToday.com is the website; or you can call if you have any questions: 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

And of course, if you’d like to support the work of *FamilyLife Today* by making a donation, you can do that online at FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the button in the upper right-hand corner of the screen that says, “I Care,” to make an online donation; or call 1-800-FL-TODAY. Or write a check and mail it to *FamilyLife Today* at P O Box 7111, Little Rock, AR. Our zip code is 72223. When you get in touch with us to make a donation, ask for the CD from Dennis Rainey about marriages that go the distance. It’s from an *I Still Do*® marriage event that we hosted a number of years ago. We’d love to send the message to you.

Please keep praying for the upcoming *I Still Do* events that we’re going to be hosting in Chicago, and Portland, and Washington, DC, here, in the next couple of weeks. We’re really looking forward to those events.

Tomorrow, we’re going to hear a portion of the commencement address that Dennis Rainey gave to the prisoners at the *Stepping Up* graduation, back in March. We’re also going to hear some of their testimonies. I hope you can tune in for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and 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. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

We are so happy to provide these transcripts to you. However, there is a cost to produce them for our website. If you’ve benefited from the broadcast transcripts, would you consider donating today to help defray the costs?

Copyright © 2014 FamilyLife. All rights reserved.

www.FamilyLife.com