

## Spiritual Branch Health Check

### Introduction

“Remain in me ... I appointed you to bear much fruit – fruit that will last.”

A car is checked annually in an MOT to identify both current and soon-to-be problems which might harm the driver, others or the environment. It is good to allow ourselves time to reflect with both God’s Word and the Holy Spirit on our spiritual life. May he guide us in areas which are not as he made them to be.

*Read John 15v1-17.*

In John 15, Jesus likens himself to a vine with us as the branches. To be healthy a branch remains in the vine. To be spiritually healthy I remain in Christ. How attached am I? This is not meant as a threatening question, but to help us see where we can develop further through a stronger connection. We will use this passage to reflect on three areas.

Before we go there, we see in this passage that God wants us to be fruitful – what sort of fruit is that? The branches on a vine are all different shapes, going in different directions and occupying different spaces, but they all have the same type of fruit. If we are in the Jesus-vine, we can expect to produce the Jesus-vine fruit. What fruit is this? In the New Testament the fruit of being in Christ is most frequently a character that is like that of Christ: for example Galatians 5v22-23, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace ...”. This character leads to a second type of fruit: Jesus made the disciples ‘fishers of men’ with a view that the fruit of their lives would be additional disciples (Matthew 4v19). We might say, ‘Where the character blossoms, the disciples develop.’

**This is the fruit God has chosen you for – character and Christ-disciples!**

### 1) Receive

A branch receives its sap from the vine, without the sap, it dies. The sap provides water, energy and nutrients and these can only come from the vine. A branch may remain on the tree for sometime after sap has stopped flowing, but it produces neither leaf nor fruit: or, a branch may be partially broken and only produce leaves or very little fruit.

As a spiritual branch, I need the flow for spiritual energizing. There are three things in this passage that we receive from the vine: cleanliness through Christ’s Word spoken to us (v3), love through Christ laying down his life for us (v13), and joy from Christ’s joy (v11). Each of these are things to be received: and these are effective in us by the Holy Spirit making the Word real in our lives. There is a simple maxim: The more I feed on God, the more I appreciate him and the more I am able to trust and obey Him. Everything flows from receiving!

*Think about how well you are currently receiving from God. Thank Him. Consider ways in which you could receive more. To help you, the following are some ways in which God feeds your mind, heart and spirit:*

- a. Reading and thinking about what God has done in history in the Bible (either on your own or with others).
- b. Reading and thinking about what God has done in history through biographies of Christians.
- c. Thinking about God’s goodness and promises through devotional books, worship songs, meditation, scripture learning.
- d. Dwelling in God’s presence.
- e. Meditating on the truth of eternal things, God’s purposes and his desires as recorded in the Bible.
- f. Participating in Communion.
- g. Fellowshiping with other believers.
- h. Being filled with God’s Holy Spirit.

## 2) Obey

Obedience is awkward in a culture which values our own opinions and choices. To obey from the heart is to follow someone in authority's view because I respect them, irrespective of my views.

What does Jesus say about obedience in John 15? It is an obedience based on Christ's words remaining in us (v7): these words of Christ that made us clean (v3) become the driving force in our hearts. This conformity of our heart to His Word results in obedience to his commands (v10): this is not a slavish obedience with a reluctant heart, but a joyful obedience out of love for God (14v31). Nor is it a blind obedience, because God has told us what he is doing (v15). And this is the command to obey, "Love one another as I have loved you" (v12).

It is easy to confuse obedience and sacrifice: God says, "To obey is better than sacrifice." (1 Samuel 15v22). Now obedience may require sacrifice, but making sacrifices is not necessarily obedience. What has God called me to? God speaks as the Holy Spirit illuminates the Bible in a way relevant to our circumstances. It does not necessarily mean we change our circumstances (see 1 Corinthians 7v17), but we do change our attitude and response to those circumstances.

*Think about how well you are currently being obedient to His Will in the following things and then consider where you would like to develop further.*

- a. What words am I receiving (or have I received) from God that I need to:
  - i. Trust (John 14v1) in allowing him to work out his good purpose?
  - ii. Obey (John 14v31) in sticking at his call, or moving outside my comfort zone?
- b. In the situation I am in (my home, family, work, leisure, shopping, friendships):
  - i. Am I a witness for Christ (Acts 1v8)?
  - ii. Do I "Love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength"?
  - iii. Do I "Love my neighbour as myself"?

## 3) Cut off

We have come to this last, but Jesus begins with this: the Father is the Gardener and he cuts off the branches which do not bear fruit (v2). He also prunes back the branches that are bearing fruit (v2). Jesus is very direct and the Gardener is very severe with unfruitfulness which is a result of not remaining in Christ (v6). Unfruitful branches may prevent the growth of other branches and may even pass disease to other branches. For the overall good of the vine, they must be cut off.

We should guard our own 'branch' (our own life). We do this by cutting off the unclean and unfruitful things in our own lives (the twigs which bear no fruit). This is not just about what is bad, this is about what is unfruitful. Jesus' expectation is that we are hugely spiritually productive! Our fruit is our character and discipling others.

*Think about areas of your life which are bearing fruit and those which are not. This is not about condemnation (Romans 8v1), but pruning to maximize fruitfulness. Are any of the following like a cut in your branch limiting the supply of spiritual sap and fruitfulness?:*

- a. Deceived by world - Be careful what my heart listens to from the world and is thereby inclined to put its trust or hope in.
- b. Overwhelmed by circumstances - Turn my attention from my circumstances to Christ.
- c. Relationship breakdown - Humbly seek reconciliation quickly.
- d. Relationship breakdown - Dwell on who others are in Christ rather than on what they have done.
- e. Pride - Guard against honouring and serving myself.
- f. Sin & Shame - Avoid sin such as in 2 Timothy 3v1-5
- g. Repeated sin - Avoid temptation to which I am susceptible
- h. Self-interest - Discern where I am acting or speaking because I want control, pleasure, security, significance or approval.