

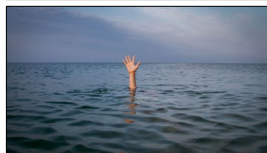
Vital Signs IV

Created to Branch Out

April 27, 2025



Today we're questioning *the condition of our connections*. Cuz, as we've discussed in this little "spiritual physical" series, we *all* have an *appointment* to stand *alone* before Christ's *throne* and *answer* for our *actions* – and though we *don't know* the *specific* questions, we *do know* it'll involve how we *used* our God-given *life* to fulfill our 5 God-given *purposes* to *believe*, *belong*, *become*, *branch out*, and *bestow*. And, since we've *already* tackled the first *three*, it's time to *look into* how we're *branching out*! And *that* means honestly assessing, *what are you offering to others?*



Last week Bruce gave an Easter message about how Moses' snake on a pole was a foreshadow of Jesus on the cross – and how *each* offered *healing* to anyone who would just *turn* and *trust*. And although the insights were *awesome* and *illuminating*, today, I'd like to emphasize where the similarities *stop*. And you know what one of the *biggest* differences is between our *Savior* and a *snake*? Arms. *Seriously*.

Cuz *arms are the instruments of outreach* and *without 'em, you literally can't reach out!* Which would be a *problem* for the *kind* of *Savior* us *humans* need! Sure, *a lot* of our problems have *solutions* that *can* be found through diligent *seeking alone* – but for the big ones, *people* need *their help* to meet 'em *halfway!* *Someone's gotta reach out when what we need is out of our reach*. Cuz *some* situations *don't* have *attainable* answers that are *set up* like a snake on a pole for us to *find* on our own; *some situations are made to be beyond our control* to *teach* us to *rely* on the *relationships* that are *within* our *reach*. And that's where *other people* come in – when *someone* realizes *they* need *someone else*. And I hate to *break* it to you – but *you're someone else to everybody else*. And some of *them* – need *you* to survive.

You know that *scene* in TV shows where the more *reserved* main character is out to *dinner* and someone starts *choking*, so our *reluctant* hero is *forced* to *clumsily* try the Heimlich maneuver for the first time? *It's like that!* Whether we *want* to or *not*, *we were created with an obligation to reach out and step in when we can offer any kind of assistance*. I know, cuz it happened to *me!*

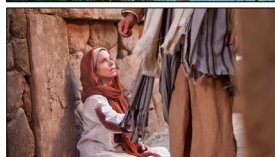
A few years ago, I was at the *youth retreat* in Leavenworth, at *cheese shop*, when one of the *leaders* turned *beet red* and *stopped talking*. So, I kinda *smiled* and said, *"What, are you choking?"* and they *nodded...* And I said, *"What – seriously?!"* and they *nodded much faster!* So I spun around to see if any *other* cheese mongers were *stepping in* – but only found a room full of *blank, frozen* faces. And for exactly *three* seconds, a *million* thoughts ran through my head; *"I don't know the Heimlich"* *"Is this a joke?"* *"What if I try and fail?"* *"Do I have to?"* And then, *something* in *me* grabbed him, spun him, and started Heimliching like there was no tomorrow; I almost passed out – and then the food *came out!* And all I could think was, *"I can't believe that worked!"* Cuz I had *no idea* what I was *doing!*

But in *hindsight*, I think that's *why* it worked. Because I *wasn't* the one *doing* it. The *physical* me was busy asking *questions* and working up *worry* while someone *else* – *in me* – took *action*. And I think that *someone* was named "*Love*" cuz in case you forgot *who* we are:



God said, "Let Us make *mankind* in Our image – Genesis 1:26 NIV

[And] God is love. – 1 John 4:16 NIV



Which means **the core character of our created identity is designed to represent and reproduce love.** And therefore, **we require relationships to feel fulfilled.** So, when obvious *opportunities* for love arise, the *instincts* of our true identity *kick in* and tell us to *reach out*. And although *stopping* someone from *choking to death* has gotta be one of the *most obvious* opportunities to express the *simplest* form love – it *does* echo the character of our Creator when *our situation* grew beyond our abilities.

Cuz we may hate to admit it, but **each one of us is slowly having the life choked out of us by this world.** Cuz *down here*, everyone who goes toe to toe with death *alone*, takes the *loss*; unless we *reach out* for a relationship with *Jesus*. Cuz He didn't just defeat *His death* by *evading sin*, **He disarmed it once and for all by coming here to bring eternal life within everyone's reach!**



[As Paul says:] "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is *sin*, and the *power* of sin is the *law*. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. – 1 Corinthians 15:53-57 NIV

Cuz when Jesus died on the cross, He *paid* for *sin*, *fulfilled* the *law*, and *brought* God's life-saving *love* to every soul willing to *concede* their *need* and *receive* His *help*! And when He *froze* in that *pose*, we were given a perfect *picture* of how God *branches out* to offer *His* assistance: with **open arms, extended as an invitation to salvation!** Cuz *that's* the love at the *core* of our Creator's character and *that's* the image *we were created to copy*; God's love, *branching out*! Cuz God said:

I am going to bring My servant, the Branch. [And then Jesus said:] – Zechariah 3:8 NIV

As the Father has sent Me, [the Branch] I am sending you. – John 20:21 NIV



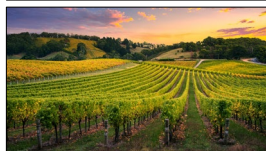
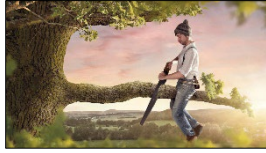
Which makes *us* branches of *the branch* and begs the *question*: how do we branch like *the Branch* branched? Well, believe it or not, like a branch! And here's how *they* work: *first*, **branches establish a strong connection to their root** and only *after* that, **branches share their root by producing fruit.**

So, in the *same* way *Jesus* used *His* connection to God to bring God to *us* – **we gotta strengthen our connection with Jesus so we can bring Jesus to others.** Which is *why*, when Jesus was asked,

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." – Matthew 22:36-40 NIV

Because it *only* takes *these two* steps to *branch out* like the *branch* we were *born to be*. We simply **love the Lord to connect to our root**, so we can **love others by sharing His fruit!** As Jesus goes on:

I am the *vine*; you are the *branches*. [So, in the same way plants grow] If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; [but] apart from Me you can do nothing. – John 15:5 NIV



Sure can't! Can I share a *secret* with you? I'm *not that great*. I've got more *issues* than *National Geographic* and if I were *up here* on my own, *none* of you would want to *hear* what I have to say. You're only *here* because of my *connection* to someone else *worth* listening to; *Jesus!* And that *same* connection is *open* to *all of us* so we can *all have* something *worth* sharing. And *that's* the goal, cuz *branches* are all about *growth!* In fact, branches *don't* exist on their own cuz **a branch's whole purpose is to extend the vine!**

The best parts of any of us comes from how connected we are to *Christ*. So, here's a truth that should put you at ease if you're fighting to find meaning in life: **Your branch is meant to merely bring the fruit of the root to feed those in need.** And if you try to use all of your God-given *talents* and *gifts* on *yourself*, you'll *never* feel *fulfilled*. Because I want you to hear this *loud* and *clear*: your **fruit is not for you!** *It's for others!* Apple trees *don't* eat *apples*, grapevines *don't* eat *grapes*, and we *don't* feed by fulfilling our own need. A *branch* is satisfied by feeding *others*. Cuz

"My food," said [God's branch,] Jesus, "is to do the will of Him who sent Me – John 4:34 NIV

And *likewise*, we know the will of the *divine* Vine who sent *us* to branch out in *His image*:

This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be *My disciples*. "As the Father has loved *Me*, so have I loved *you*." Now remain in My love... [cuz now it's your turn, and] My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. – John 15:8-9,12 NIV

That is, **"Branch out to bring others God's love the way I came to you to bring you God's love."** Cuz **only feeding others produces the love that fulfills our identity!** That's why it feels good to give even though it means *having less* and that's why *our food* is to *do* the will of the One *who sent us!*

Remember, *your fruit* is just a function of *your root* – so **whatever you have to offer is just the unique flavor that Jesus's love takes on as it passes through your branch.**

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. – 1 John 4:7 NIV

[Which means] We love because He *first* loved *us*. – 1 John 4:19 NIV

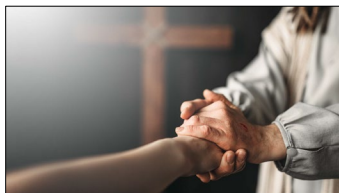
We're just *passing it on!* Like we read *earlier*, God *is* love – and since **our image is meant to be His image, our love is meant to be His love.** Because, with the *first* Branch,

God was reconciling the *world* to *Himself in Christ* ... [But now] He has committed to us the message of *reconciliation*. We are therefore *Christ's ambassadors*, as though God were making His appeal through us. – 2 Corinthians 5:19-20 NIV

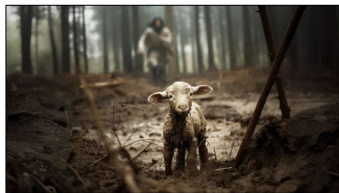
As we grow into our intended image, we get to do what Jesus did and branch out as the open arms of God that bring the life-saving help humans need, within reach. We get to be ambassadors of the love of God that has the power to pull everyone out of their duel with death. **We get to be the arms that reach out and give a spiritual Heimlich to every person gasping for air** as they choke on all the flavorless food this unfulfilling world offers. What an honor! And what a responsibility!



Cuz **every one of you in this room is only here because someone, at some time, somehow shared God's love in a way that moved you to attend today.** And just like Jesus, it only happened when they went out of their way to get out of God's way, so He could use their specific branch to entice you toward His root. So now it's our turn! Because



[Jesus] died for all, [so] that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them ... – 2 Corinthians 5:15 NIV



[The way Paul says:] I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me – Galatians 2:20 NIV



So is that you? **Are you letting Jesus use your life to offer others the love that saved you?** That's what it means to be a branch. **You weren't saved to become a dead end, you were saved to become the beginning of another life.** Like Jesus, our job is to branch out and track down every struggling soul in hopes that it'll be our specific fruit that attracts them to the root of our love. And that's where the fun begins!



Because **being an ambassador doesn't mean you're just a go-between; it means you're a branch manager!** Cuz, like we said, it may be God's love that we grow, but it's our life that gives it flavor. And in the same way the same sun grows apples and oranges, God's love can grow a plethora of different produce. So our job is to fill our branch with a new fruit that's bound to be someone's new favorite!

Because **we each offer fruit perfectly suited to someone's appetite.** And it's an awesome feeling to connect with the particular people with a hunger for your one-of-a-kind cuisine – cuz together, we create a whole crowd of fulfilled diners and satisfied servers. Like when I was a bartender, our place was packed because our staff each had our own appeal and therefore, our own regulars; the ones who kept coming back because of a shared connection. Tonya was our young flirty firecracker – so she got all the Navy guys. Jeremy was easy-going, good-looking chuckle-head – so he handled all the college kids – and I was... well y'all know me – so I got the sarcastic smart-alecs, sassy secretaries, and sweet grannies (who are secretly the best tippers)!

But my point is this: **there's a group of regulars literally dying for a taste of what you're serving!** And if you wouldn't walk by someone choking in a cheese shop, how can you ignore those around you spiritually suffering when you have the power to be the branch that brings eternal life within reach? You can't. You just have to let God's love take action while you worry – cuz **nobody said it'd be easy that's why they call it "going out on a limb!"** But God promises it'll be fruitful and fulfilling!