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As COVID season slowly winds down, I'm assessing the condition of my own heart, soul, mind, and strength.

I'm asking God to show me the true condition of my life and ministry so that He can prune out anything that's unfruitful.

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."
(John 15:1-5).*

My interest in personal pruning was inspired by a recent post by Dr. Hance Dilbeck, who's the Executive Director of Oklahoma Baptists:

"I hope we will have wisdom to embrace this interruption of our lives as a pruning, not just a pause...Some of what was cut from your life should stay cut. Some of what has been cut from your church should stay cut. If this spring was merely a pause, all we got out of it was a little rest."

Jesus taught that our Father is like a vineyard owner who removes disconnected, unfruitful branches and prunes the connected, fruitful ones (John 15:1-8).

I want to invite you to join me in a personal pruning exercise that boils down to two questions I'm asking God and myself during this season.

WHAT SHOULD I REMOVE?

What fruitless thing has been cut out of your life by COVID-19 that you don't want to see again? Here's a glimpse of my list so far:



"But we all... beholding... the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12; see also Colossians 3:16)

PREACH
 ENGAGE

Instagram - I love beautiful pictures and videos like everybody else, but the temptation to wander off into gray areas became too distracting for me.

When and if Instagram has a better filtering system, I may reconsider returning to it someday.

Cable TV - We moved to Tulsa in January and never got around to subscribing to a cable service. We got used to catching news updates on YouTube or Facebook.

Perhaps a pandemic is a great opportunity to binge-watch TV, but we have surprisingly not missed the programs we once thought were so important.

Pop-Tarts - Sheltering at home turned into snacking at home, which turned into some unwanted pounds.

I asked my disciplined wife for help, so she hid my Pop-Tarts and stocked our shelves and frig with much smarter options. We also started jogging 3-4 miles every other day.

Pruning is an important part of spiritual formation and we need to make sure it is embraced in our own life and then emphasized in our ministry to others especially in relation to "walking in the light" of Jesus and God's Word.

Jesus has declared *"I am the light ..."* and the Psalmist notes that *"Thy Word is a lamp ... and a light "* (John 8:12; Psalm 119:105).

There's a great connection with the sources of light and "pruning".

- Encounters with JESUS "prune" us : The Father's loving plan is that our encounters with Jesus might transform us into His very image. Faithful disciples diligently pursue fresh encounters with Jesus with yielded hearts, confident that such encounters will make them a little more like Him.
- Experiencing Scripture "prunes" us : Jesus said that Scripture ("the law and the prophets") hangs, or depends, upon two commandments – Love God, and love others (Matthew 22:35-40). Scripture has a relational purpose – to lead us into maturity through deepened love relationships with the God who breathed it and with those He loves.





God “prunes” or transforms us through the Word

“And Mary said, ‘Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her” (Luke 1:38 NASB)

W-3 Yielding to the scripture’s protective cautions and transforming power to bring life change in me.

The life of a Spirit-empowered Jesus follower is characterized by this same “yieldedness” to the Word as we see in Mary. Our cry is the same as hers. Today, I want to “Do” Your Word as I walk in the light of Your Word through frequent experiences of Scripture (John 12:35; Psalm 119:105).

“Since you have in obedience to the truth, purified your souls -- fervently love one another from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22). Prayerfully reflect on the Bible verses below. Which one of these might you need to experience more often?

- Proverbs 15:1 -- “A gentle answer turns away wrath.”
- Romans 15:7 -- “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.”
- James 5:16 -- “Confess your sins to each other.”
- Ephesians 4:32 -- “Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”
- Ephesians 4:15 -- “Speaking the truth in love...”
- Ephesians 4:29 -- “Let no unwholesome words come out of your mouth but only such words that edify (buildup).”

Take time to reflect on this one verse. Pray together with a partner or small group. Ask Jesus to make this verse truer of you and empower you to do the Bible.

Lord Jesus, lead me beyond merely knowing the truth to actually experiencing more _____ . Replace any prideful knowledge with Your love that builds up as Your truth is lived out (2 Corinthians 8:1). I sense that Your Spirit might want this verse to be particularly true of me in my relationship with _____

