

Identity in Christ

Who Am I?

The second most important question you'll ever answer is "Who am I?" It's a question our society is obsessed with. But, as we discussed in the beginning of the Discipleship Pathway, the first most important question you'll ever answer is "Who is Jesus?"

And here's the beautiful thing: "Who am I?" and "Who is Jesus?" are inseparable questions.

The good news of Jesus creates a new identity *in* Jesus. The gospel not only forgives us our sin and gives us a new perspective on the world, but it gives us a new view of ourselves. It reshapes more than our theology—it reshapes our identity.

Many Christians seem to have a form of gospel amnesia. We've been given an identity in Christ, but, like the character Leonard in the film *Memento*, many of us wake up every day having forgotten who we are.

Western culture tells us that, not only do we need to *find* our identity, but we need to create our identity. So we work tirelessly to construct one based on achievements, career, sexuality, or appearance. Then we project it to the world through well-curated social media accounts. This is identity through performance.

We believe in Jesus but forget about the new identity that we have been given by him. And despite the fact that identity is one of the most versed topics in our culture today, more people than ever are confused over who they are. We need to know what our identity is and we need to remind ourselves of it daily.

While today we feel this increasing pressure to build our own identity, for most of human history your identity was something given to you. You didn't decide where you lived or what you did for work. You didn't even choose who you married.

These days our options are almost unlimited, but the freedom to construct our own identities comes with a pressure to earn the world's approval.

What career will you choose, and how will it satisfy you and impact the world? What city will you live in, and what will that say about you? Will you marry, and how can you retain your freedom while attaching yourself to another?

Before we go too far into cultural analysis, let's personalize this. What do you find your identity in? Is it past failure or the hope of future success? Do you find your identity in your work or your accomplishments? Is it your personality or something you're really good at?

Our search for identity is real, but most of the things we choose to build our identity on are fleeting. If you build your identity on your reputation, that can be undone with a single tweet. If you base your identity on money, an economic downturn can mean personal failure. If your identity is dependent on your career, one bad decision can bring it all crashing down.

The kingdom of God provides us with a different way of thinking about our identity. Through the gospel our identity is received, not achieved.

Consider: what do you try to achieve outside the gospel? If I believe my family's protection or friends' wellbeing or employer's existence depends on me, then I'm taking on God's role and I end up burned-out, resentful, and confused because I'm assuming an identity that was never mine.

But now I'm free to let God be God because he has given me a priceless, beautiful identity that belongs to me and that I belong to as well. The core of our God-given identity is this profound truth: in Christ, each of us is a new person with a new family on a new mission.

What a glorious identity! We are part of God's family and have a seat at his banquet table. A room in his house. It also means that, before we ever begin to receive our new identity, we are *chosen*. Unlike the identities we try to build for ourselves, this identity God gives us is unshakable. It doesn't depend on circumstances. It doesn't change with trends. It doesn't come and go with seasons.

But to truly embrace and live in this identity, we've got to understand where it comes from.

Reflect

What life accomplishments or failures are you most tempted to find your identity in? In what ways do you feel pressure to create or maintain your sense of self?

Union with Christ

Our whole identity as Christians hangs on two small words: “in Christ.”

The little phrase “in Christ” is peppered all over the New Testament, and it is rich with meaning. But not only are you declared to be “in Christ,” Scripture also says that you have “Christ in you.” Combine these two ideas and you have what theologians call the doctrine of union with Christ. **In Christ + Christ in you = union with Christ.** It’s an idea that can change your life.

Ephesians 1 gives us one example of the importance of union with Christ. Being in Christ is mentioned eight times in the first fourteen verses. Paul calls us “faithful in Christ.” Verse 3 says that by being united with Christ, we have every spiritual blessing. We are elected, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, blessed, saved, and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

The variety of these blessings can be seen in the fact that the Bible primarily identifies followers of Jesus, not as “Christians” or “believers,” but as those “in Christ.” The New Testament refers to being united with Christ over two hundred fifty times.

Union with Christ is not just another idea to believe; it’s a paradigm shift.

It’s a different way of understanding how we receive the immeasurable riches of God’s grace. For example, most people picture receiving God’s grace as if his blessings were raining down across the landscape of our lives, and we have to run around madly with a bucket trying to gather up his different blessings. All kinds of blessings are available, but I have to run around trying to catch them all.

But union with Christ gives us a more accurate picture of how we receive the immeasurable riches of God’s grace. God really is raining down all his blessings, but they aren’t scattered showers forcing us to find them and collect them through our own efforts. Instead, they come to us through a single funnel, and that funnel is the person of Jesus.

As long as we are with Jesus, then every spiritual blessing—redemption, forgiveness, healing, eternal life, wisdom, and everything else—comes to us through our union with him because every spiritual blessing belongs to him.

So how does this union work? 1 John 4:13 says, “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” Do you see the idea of union with Christ in that verse? We abide in him and he in us. Then it says that this is possible

because of his Holy Spirit who dwells in us. So is it the Holy Spirit or is it Jesus who's in you? The answer is yes. The Holy Spirit is the one who unites you to Christ.

That might feel a bit abstract, so let's look at some of the concrete ways that Scripture talks about this.

The Bible uses all sorts of metaphors from daily life to teach us about our union with Christ, each of which gives us further insight into its nature:

- The metaphor of marriage—that Jesus is the groom and the church is his bride—shows us our union with Christ is intimate.
- The metaphor of a vineyard—that Jesus is the vine and Christians are the branches—shows us our union with Christ is life-giving.
- The metaphor of a body—that Jesus is the head and the church is his body—shows us our union with Christ is communal.
- And the metaphor of the temple—that Jesus is the cornerstone and Christians are the building blocks—show us our union with Christ is communion with God.

Here's why all this matters: if we are united with Christ—one with him—our identity is rooted not in what we can do for God, but rather in what God has done for us.

We are no longer defined by what we have done or what has been done to us. Jesus completely redefines who we are.

Ephesians 2:5 says, “even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

Did you catch how that's written in past tense? God *made* us alive with Christ. God *raised* us up with Christ and *seated* us with him. It has already happened.

“In Christ,” your identity is not something you have to work for or wait for, because you are already a child of God. If you are “in Christ,” then all the biblical truths of that identity are already yours. In Christ, you are beloved, adopted, set free, and made whole.

Reflect

What truths about identity in Christ are the most impactful to you? Which do you find hardest to believe? Feel free to use the “In Christ, I Am...” document for reference.

Becoming Who We Are

We don't just need faith to believe what is true about God, but also what God says is true about us. Whatever you think the bad news about yourself is, the good news of the gospel has answered it.

Identity is deeply connected to growth and change, but not in the way most people think. Almost every other religion in the world says that change is about becoming what you are not. If you're not pure, become pure. If you're selfish, become selfless.

But Christianity says something different: be who you already truly are in Christ. Because our identity is given to us by faith, when God declares us righteous in Christ, we must learn who we are and then live out of that identity.

In Christ you are pure, so live purely. In Christ you are light, so let your light shine. Because of grace, our identity is built not on what we do for God but on what he has done for us.

Christian growth is not a matter of changing into something you are not, but is about becoming who you truly are "in Christ." It's not about a curriculum of information or a system of ethics, but about a person—Jesus.

There is a pattern in Scripture that is especially helpful for living out of our identity: moral commands are based on gospel declarations. For example, the gospel declaration that in Christ you are accepted and the moral command to obey.

Most people tend to reverse the order of these. "If I obey, then I'll be accepted." We assume gospel declarations are based on moral commands. But the Scriptures say it's the other way around. We're accepted therefore, I obey.

- Ephesians 4 says forgive others because you have been forgiven. Therefore you can forgive others.
- 1 John 4 says love others because you have been loved. You've been loved by God so you can love others.
- Romans 6 says stop sinning because you have been freed from sin. You've been freed from sin, so you can stop sinning. This word because is not a "so that." This word because is a reflection of God's love for you, in order to obey.

Throughout Scripture, God declares our identity over us, *then* calls us to live out of that identity. So because we're beloved, we love. Because we're adopted, we adopt others

into our literal and spiritual family. Because we're set free, we set others free. Because we're made whole, we seek to make others whole.

This is not accomplished overnight, and union with Christ isn't static. It's a process and a practice. Romans 6 says, "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

Two practical ways we live out this truth of being united with Christ in his death and resurrection are baptism and the Lord's Supper. In baptism we publicly identify with Christ as he descended into death then rose again and in the Lord's Supper we remember and proclaim his death until he comes.

But the main way Christian identity is cultivated is through the daily practice of dying to self and living in Christ. If that sounds daunting, remember that Jesus is not just an example to follow, but a savior to trust. Jesus is both the pattern and the power for holy living. He's not just above us telling us what to do or in front of us showing us how to do it. He's in us—the power to do it.

Empowered by Jesus, we cultivate who we truly are over time and this process transforms our understanding of ourselves and our identity.

Sometimes we don't act like it. But rather than allowing our identities to be shaken by our missteps, we remind ourselves who we are and seek to live accordingly. You are already set free. Even when you don't feel that way, you are. You can walk in it. We'll look at some practical ways to do that in the next part of the pathway, but for now, Christian, know that you are...

loved	alive to God	a saint
chosen	resurrected to new life	holy and blameless
forgiven	under no condemnation	sealed with the Holy Spirit
a friend of God	reconciled to God	the dwelling place of God
declared righteous	a messenger of reconciliation	a participant in the divine nature
dead to sin	a citizen of heaven	a new creation

2 Corinthians 5:17 tell us, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

The gospel has given us a new identity. Our identity is no longer based on our performance but on God's grace. God has made us a new person, so we are a new person.

Ironically, it's when we stop obsessing over ourselves and start looking to Christ that we discover who we truly are.

Reflect

Think of one truth about God, (generous, forgiving, loving, etc.). What behaviors or actions does that truth encourage you toward as a way of dying to self and living in Christ?