

God doesn't want your effort - He wants His Son

By Rev. Michael Angel

Text: Luke 9:23; Matthew 16:25; Galatians 2:20; 1 John 4:17

We live in a culture that is completely obsessed with the self. From the time we are children, the world tells us to “find ourselves.” We are taught to look inward, to discover our true identity, to realize our potential, and to become the best version of ourselves.

When this cultural mindset bleeds into the church, it subtly alters the way we understand the Gospel.

One of the greatest belief shifts the Lord can ever bring a believer into is not only discovering who we are. It is the profound, paradigm-shattering realization that we were never meant to be the center of our own identity.

Christ is.

When many of us first came to Christ, we experienced a beautiful revelation regarding our identity. Like so many believers, we learned to stand in the mirror of the Word and declare, “I am the righteousness of God in Christ. I am loved. I am accepted. I am forgiven. He will never leave me nor forsake me.”

Let me be clear today: those declarations are absolutely true. They are the bedrock of our faith. They remain foundational to the Christian life.

But over time, many of us have realized that something is still missing.

You can boldly proclaim who you are in Christ on a Sunday morning, yet still wrestle with fear, insecurity, unbelief, and areas of your life where you are not walking in the authority that Scripture describes.

You can know the theology of your identity, yet still feel the heavy burden of self. That tension—the gap between our biblical declarations and our daily reality—should drive us back into the Word.

And when we do, we find a truth that completely shifts our perspective.

We must realize that it is entirely possible to proclaim biblical truths while still being more conscious of ourselves than we are of Christ.

Point 1: The Trap of the "Improved Self"

Without intending to, much of Western Christianity has subtly made identity revolve around us. We have become consumed with the pronouns of self: "I am... I

have... I can..." While those statements can be biblically true, they can unintentionally leave our eyes fixed on ourselves instead of the One in whom our identity is actually found.

We have bought into a subtle lie: the lie that the Gospel was given to make you the best version of yourself.

Please, hear me today: The Gospel is not a self-help program. The Gospel is not a divine strategy for your personal actualization.

The Gospel is a call to come and die.

Jesus never invited us to improve ourselves. He did not come to earth to launch a global campaign for human betterment. He came to inaugurate a Kingdom that requires the death of the old self. Listen to the words of our Lord in Luke 9:23: "Then He said to them all, 'Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me.'"

Notice the order. Deny yourself. Take up the cross. Follow Me.

Jesus never said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him discover his true self, embrace his potential, and follow Me."

He called us to deny ourselves. To deny yourself does not mean to hate yourself or to have low self-esteem.

It means to dethrone yourself. It means to step down from the throne of your own life and invite Jesus to take His rightful place.

The Apostle Paul understood this better than anyone. Paul had every reason to boast in his own identity. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, blameless under the law, highly educated, and deeply respected.

If anyone could have preached a sermon on “Being the Best Version of Paul,” it was him. But after an encounter with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul’s perspective was obliterated and rebuilt.

He didn’t say, “I am becoming the best version of Paul.”

He wrote in Galatians 2:20: “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.”

Paul didn’t improve the old Paul; the old Paul died. And in his place, Christ lived.

That is a completely different perspective. It is the difference between trying to polish a broken vessel and allowing the Potter to crush it and mold it into something entirely new.

Point 2: The Illusion of Restoration

There is another subtle shift I believe has taken place in our modern Christianity, particularly regarding how we approach God in our pain.

Many people come to Christ because their lives are falling apart. Their marriage is broken. Their finances have collapsed. Their health is failing. They've lost their purpose. They are desperate for hope.

Let me assure you, there is nothing wrong with coming to Jesus in desperation. Throughout the Gospels, countless people came to Him blind, bleeding, broken, and desperate. He never turned them away.

The problem comes when we believe the ultimate goal of the Gospel is simply to get our old life back.

When the storm hits, we begin praying, "Lord, restore my marriage. Restore my finances. Restore my career.

Restore my peace. Put the pieces back together so I can go back to how things were."

Now, let me clarify: those aren't wrong prayers. God is a restorer. He is the God of Israel, and He delights in restoring what has been broken. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

But if we are not careful, we have unknowingly made Christ the means to getting back the life we wanted. We treat Jesus like a divine mechanic, called in only to fix the engine so we can get back on the road to our own destination.

Jesus never promised to give us our old life back. In fact, He invited us to lose it.

In Matthew 16:25, Jesus makes one of the most radical statements in all of Scripture: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will find it."

Do you see the difference? The world says, "Save your life, protect your dreams, build your kingdom, and Jesus will help you do it."

Jesus says, "Lose your life. Surrender your dreams. Let your kingdom fall, and I will give you Mine."

The Gospel never summons us to come to Christ so He can help us fulfill our personal dreams. It summons us to surrender our lives so completely that His life may be revealed through ours.

We don't come to God to manipulate Him into rebuilding the kingdom we've imagined for ourselves.

We come to surrender our lives so that He can establish His Kingdom through us.

Look at the disciples. That is why Paul could say, "It is no longer I who live." Paul didn't get his old life back. He lost his status, his comfort, and eventually, his physical life as a martyr.

Peter didn't get his old life back. He left his fishing nets and eventually hung upside down on a cross in Rome. None of the disciples got their old lives back. They lost them.

Yet, what they received in Christ far exceeded anything they ever surrendered. They traded a temporary, earthly existence for an eternal, glorious purpose.

That is the great exchange of the Gospel.

We don't come to Christ to get our life back. We come to Christ to give our life away. And ironically, it is only when we surrender our lives that we finally discover what life truly is.

Point 3: The Shift from Self-Awareness to Christ-Awareness

This radical surrender changes the way we understand identity. We must realize that identity isn't primarily about becoming more aware of who you are.

It's about becoming more aware of who Christ is in you.

If my life is hidden with Christ in God, as Colossians 3:3 declares, then His life becomes my life. His nature becomes my nature. His authority becomes my authority. His mission becomes my mission.

The Apostle John makes one of the boldest, most mind-expanding statements in all of Scripture in 1 John 4:17: "This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus."

Or, translated more literally from the original Greek, "As He is, so are we in this world."

Think about that for a moment. Let it sink into your spirit.

John doesn't say, "As you feel, so are you in this world." If our identity was based on our feelings, we would be tossed to and fro by every emotional wind.

He doesn't say, "As your past defines you, so are you in this world." If our identity was based on our past, we would be chained to our mistakes.

He doesn't even say, "As you are becoming, so are you in this world." If our identity was based on our personal growth, we would always be striving and never arriving.

He says, "As He is, so are we in this world."

Christ becomes the reference point. The finished work of Jesus becomes the lens through which we view our identity.

This means the Christian life is no longer about asking, "What am I capable of?" The better, more powerful question is, **"What is Christ capable of through a life that is fully surrendered to Him?"**

This is why I believe so many sincere believers remain frustrated.

They faithfully declare, “I am the righteousness of God in Christ,” yet they continue evaluating their lives through their own limitations instead of Christ’s finished work. They look in the mirror and see their flaws, their weaknesses, and their failures. We’ve often tried to fit the Gospel into our existing framework of self-improvement rather than allowing the Gospel to completely redefine us.

We need to understand the biblical definition of sin.

Paul says in Romans 3:23 that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

We often think of sin merely as breaking a rule or doing something wrong. And while that is true, at its deepest, most foundational level, sin is falling short of the glory humanity was originally created to reveal.

We were created to be mirrors, reflecting the glorious nature of God. When we look at ourselves, we miss the mark.

Therefore, the Gospel isn’t merely a legal transaction to forgive sinners. It is a cosmic restoration.

It’s about restoring humanity to the image, the authority, the communion, and the glory for which we were created

from the very beginning in Genesis. **We are not just forgiven rebels; we are restored image-bearers.**

Point 4: Vessels of His Glory

When we grasp this, it changes everything. It changes how we see ourselves, how we see others, and how we engage with the world.

When Jesus walked the earth, people saw the Father. When Jesus spoke, people heard the truth. When Jesus touched the sick, they were healed. When Jesus loved, lives were transformed.

Today, Christ has chosen to reveal Himself through His Body—the Church. You and I are not replacing Him, nor are we independent from Him. We are one with Him. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God.

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:7: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”

We are the jars of clay. We are the yielded vessels. But the treasure inside is Christ.

When we speak His Word under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Christ speaks through His Body. When we

lay hands on the sick in faith, it is not our power that heals; Christ ministers through His Body.

When people encounter genuine love, holiness, mercy, compassion, and truth flowing from our lives, they are not just seeing good people; they are encountering the life of Jesus expressed through yielded vessels.

This revelation has completely changed the way I see my life, and I pray it changes the way you see yours.

I no longer wake up in the morning, look in the mirror, and ask, “How can I become a better version of myself?” That question is too small. It keeps the focus on me.

Instead, I ask one simple, life-altering question: **“Lord, how do You want to reveal Christ through me today?”**

That question has changed everything. It takes the pressure off of me to perform, and it places the focus on Him to manifest.

The more I behold Him, the less occupied I become with myself. The more I surrender my rights, my plans, and my desires, the more His life is manifested through mine.

The more Christ fills my vision, the more His glory becomes visible in the way I live, the way I love, the way I serve, and the way I minister.

When you stop trying to be the main character of your own story, you finally become the vessel God created you to be. You stop striving to prove your worth, and you start resting in His work. You stop trying to build your own kingdom, and you start advancing His.

Conclusion: The Final Surrender

Perhaps the greatest belief shift we need today, the greatest paradigm shift the modern church needs, is this: Identity is not about making much of yourself. Identity is about becoming so surrendered that Christ can make Himself known through you.

The Gospel doesn't make much of you. It reveals much of Christ through you.

So, I want to challenge you today. If you are tired of striving, if you are exhausted from trying to be the "best version of yourself," if you are frustrated because your self-help Christianity isn't producing the power you see in the Book of Acts, it is time to shift your focus.

Stop looking at the mirror. Start looking out the window at Jesus.

Stop praying, “Lord, make me great.” Start praying,
“Lord, make me available.”

Stop asking, “Lord, restore my old life.” Start asking,
“Lord, give me Your new life.”

It is time to take up our cross. It is time to lose our lives for His sake, so that we might truly find them. Let us be a people who are so hidden in Christ, so surrendered to the Spirit, that when the world looks at us, they don't see our flaws, they don't see our achievements, and they don't see our personalities.

When the world looks at us, may they see Jesus.

May we be the jars of clay that reveal the treasure. May we be the vessels that carry the glory. May we be the Body of Christ that continues His work on this earth.

Let us pray.

Father, we repent for the times we have made the Gospel about us. We repent for seeking Your hand more than Your face, and for seeking Your gifts more than Your glory.

Forgive us for trying to fit Your infinite, cosmic Kingdom into the tiny, fragile framework of our own egos.

Today, we lay down our old lives. We lay down our need to be the center of our own identity. We crucify the flesh with its passions and desires.

Hide us in Christ. Let it no longer be we who live, but Christ who lives in us. As He is, so may we be in this world. In the mighty and matchless name of Jesus we pray. Amen.