

Before You Try Harder: Living From Who You Are, Not Who You're Trying to Become

Part 1: Stop Trying Harder: Discover Your Identity in Jesus

Ephesians 1:3-14

Summary: Lasting spiritual change comes from identity in Jesus, not religious performance or self-improvement.

Main Ideas:

The push to improve can leave us feeling like we're never enough.

Our value is received, not achieved.

Our place in God's family was his idea, not our achievement.

When we become children of God, our identity fundamentally changes.

God adopted us because it was the thing that would make him the happiest.

Following Jesus starts by receiving, not achieving

Belief is choosing to be confident that God can and will do what he promised.

You can stop chasing a better you and rest in who you already are in Jesus.

Invitation: Remember who you are and speak your true name to yourself.

- I am a child of God.
- I have all I need in Jesus.
- I am chosen.
- I am adopted and accepted.
- I am saved, forgiven, and sealed.

Transcript:

IN: It's a new year... which means... New Year's resolutions.

- Maybe you're here b/c you made a resolution to go to church more... or get closer to God.
- So glad you're here, that's awesome.

TENSION: But isn't it interesting, whether you've set resolutions or not, there seems to always be this pressure to improve ourselves.

- And it's all year long.

The world is screaming at us... "Fix Yourself!"

- Exercise more, eat healthier, read more, save more, get organized.

These are good and helpful goals...

- But the push to improve can leave us feeling like we're never enough.

RELIGIOUS ASSUMPTION: Maybe some of us have felt this pressure from religion too...

It can feel like all we hear is... you're a dirty sinner, so fix yourself... try harder.

- Like, somehow we need to earn God's love or approval.
- Go to church more. Read the Bible more. Pray more. Stop doing all those things you know you shouldn't do.

The unspoken assumption is that we aren't good enough as we are, that our value as a person depends on how well we can fix ourselves... how well we can meet some imaginary ideal.

It's exhausting.

- And all this striving brings shame and guilt when you don't measure up... or when you don't even want to try.

THE SOLUTION: But... Jesus offers something better.

- Something that doesn't leave us exhausted and guilty.
- Something that shows us our true worth, out of which everything else in our lives can take shape.

It doesn't come from trying harder.

- It comes from accepting a new identity...
- See... Our value is received, not achieved.

THE SOLUTION EXPLAINED: While in prison around 60 AD, the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Jesus-Followers in the ancient city of Ephesus, and showed them (and Jesus-Followers today) who they really are and who everyone is invited to become.

In a world where everyone believed you had to earn the favor of the gods through sacrifice and ritual, Paul showed that instead of demanding something from us, Jesus offers something to us.

Here's how he starts... And in the original letter, it's all one long, breathless sentence... Paul just can't hold back his excitement.

Ephesians 1:3 (NLT) *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.*

Paul says don't worry about not being enough... We already have EVERYTHING we need from God b/c we are united with him.

Jesus-Followers are not earning/might achieve/can figure out... but HAVE every spiritual blessing.

- You can't make a resolution to get these things. They are already yours if you belong to Jesus.

But sometimes we don't experience them, not b/c they aren't ours, or b/c they aren't real, but b/c we don't realize or remember what's already ours.

- And we forget we don't have to earn them.

Ok but what are they?

- A personal relationship with God, forgiveness, eternal life now and forever
- And everything given by the Holy Spirit... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Think about it: All the things we chase after with resolutions, peace, purpose, a fresh start, don't these all flow out of the blessings God gives us in Jesus?

But how do we get these blessings? Who qualifies for them? What gives us access?

That's what Paul explains next.

Ephesians 1:4-6 (NLT) *Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son.*

Even before God made the world... he loved us and chose us!

- Before anyone in your family tree was born, God had already planned to bring you into his family.

Our place in God's family was his idea, not our achievement.

Now maybe this idea of being "chosen" makes you ask... "Does that mean God picks some people and not others?"

- From the rest of Paul's writings and other scripture, I personally think it's pretty clear that God offers to adopt everyone.
- Everyone is invited.
- So, if you want to be chosen... he has chosen you.

Matthew 11:28 (NLT) *Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

Now, in Ancient Roman society, this idea of adoption meant you became a full and legal child with all the rights and inheritance of a natural-born son or daughter.

So if you are a Jesus-follower, your core identity isn't "outsider," "impostor," or even "sinner." It is Child of God.

I used to have a friend who, when you said, "Hey, how are you?" He'd reply with, "I'm just a sinner saved by grace."

- When a woman was pregnant, he'd ask, "Do you know what it is yet?" And the parents would think he meant is it a boy or a girl, but he would then say, "I know what it is... It's a sinner."

That always bothered me, b/c God calls his children saints, sons, and daughters... not sinners.

- Yes, we still struggle, but sin isn't the core of who we are anymore... Jesus is.

When we become children of God, our identity fundamentally changes.

- Neither your past nor your present defines who you are anymore.

Paul says we ARE holy and blameless... without fault in his eyes!

- Nothing to earn. Nothing to prove.
- Not b/c of our effort but b/c that's who God says we are in Jesus.
- Nothing to do but accept it, enjoy it, and live out our new identity.

And why would God do this for us? V.5 Says... ***This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.***

- Literally Sheer delight!

Think about that!

- He didn't just do it b/c it was the nice thing to do. Or b/c he had to b/c he's God.
- God adopted us b/c it was the thing that would make him the happiest.
- God of the universe, who has all power, has everything and created everything... wants nothing more than to have you as his child.
- It's what he's been waiting for for all eternity.

But if you've ever been through, or known someone who's been through, an adoption process...you know real adoption is costly.

- It's never easy. It comes at a price.

And our adoption cost God everything...

Ephesians 1:7-8 (NLT) *He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.*

God himself became human, Jesus, and purchased us not with money or good deeds, but with his own life.

- Our freedom from sin and death required a payment only he could make: he took our death on himself, and then conquered death by rising again.

That means you are so precious to God that he gave everything, even his life, to make you his child.

- You weren't an afterthought. You weren't cheap.
- God moved heaven and earth to adopt you.

You only choose to die for what you can't bear to live without.

- And he couldn't bear to live without you.

This means following Jesus starts by receiving, not achieving... accepting the identity he paid everything to give you.

- And that identity can never be taken from you.

Your worth and your future are secure, not in how hard you try to keep them, or how well you perform.

- Your identity rests in Jesus' love and rescue.

And more than that... It's not just a gift you receive, it's a reality God himself keeps secure for you.

Here's how Paul finished this long sentence...

Ephesians 1:12-14 (NLT) *God's purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.*

Notice that phrase... "You have heard the truth, the good news that saves you."

That word for Good News, “Euangelion”, meant the long-awaited announcement that God has come, that he’s rescuing humanity, bringing his Kingdom to earth, restoring and adopting people into his family.

How? By Jesus defeating sin and death... not just saving us from some kind of cosmic future, but from slavery to sin and fear right now.

We are now free to be part of a new family that can forgive and even love our enemies.

- A family that doesn’t have to live out of shame or fear of the unknown... or even fear death.

And this Good News, this family, is open to anyone and everyone.

But how does it become ours? Paul says, “When you believed in Christ...”

And honestly, I know belief is such a difficult idea/concept for a lot of people...

- It’s not easy to measure or explain... especially with something as big as faith in God.

Here’s how I see it... have you ever gone to the chiropractor?

- You can hear all the explanations, see the degrees on the wall, but at some point, you have to relax and put yourself in their hands.
- Trust means letting go and letting them do what only they can do.
- You have to make a choice... will I trust this person with my health, my future, my ability to walk?

Belief in Jesus is like that... Belief is choosing to be confident that God can and will do what he promised.

- Choosing to trust your life to his reliability.

And the moment we do that, Paul says something almost unimaginable happens...

- God seals us, marks us as his own, by giving us the Holy Spirit.

A seal in the ancient world was a sign of belonging, ownership, and security.

So when we trust God's good news, God himself comes and marks us with his own presence... Permanently.

And there's nothing we can do to break that seal

- Just like there's nothing my kids can do to stop being my kids.
- It's not their choice. They can pretend not to know me. They can roll their eyes at my amazing jokes... but they will always be my kids... No matter what happens.

That's what Paul means when he says the Holy Spirit is the guarantee: God himself ensures you will never stop being his child.

God the Father chose you, God the Son ransomed and adopted you, and God the Spirit secures you.

SO WHAT?: This means you don't have to spend your energy trying to earn other people's approval.

- You don't have to prove your worth at work, at school, or at home... because your true identity and value are secured by God.
- So when you're criticized or overlooked at work, instead of spiraling into self-doubt or scrambling to justify yourself, you can remember:
- "My identity isn't my job title or what my boss thinks. I am a loved child of God."

It means that even your failures, even your sins, don't get the final word.

- You can own your mistakes, seek forgiveness, and keep moving forward.
- So when you mess up, AGAIN, you don't have to walk in shame or get stuck in guilt.
- God still calls you his beloved child, offering you a new chance to try again and again.
- When your past tries to rear its ugly head, you can say, "Yes, that *WAS* me... but it's not who I am anymore. I've been adopted into a new family."

It also means you don't have to manipulate, impress, or hide your real self from others.

- Instead of always saying yes out of fear or pretending to be someone you're not, you can have honest conversations b/c your value is never at risk.

It means that hard seasons or losses don't mean God has let you go.

- Since you're sealed by the Spirit, your future is secure... even when life doesn't go the way you hoped.
- So if you're facing unemployment, illness, or just uncertainty about what's next, you can say,
- "Even if I lose everything else, nothing can take away who I am in Jesus. I am secure in him."

And... knowing you're loved and provided for by your heavenly Father... you can be generous with your time, your money, your attention, and your forgiveness, b/c you're not living from scarcity anymore.

- You can help a neighbor, volunteer without needing recognition, or forgive a family member, simply because you've already had everything you need given to you in Jesus.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE: So let's begin this year by standing in our identity instead of striving for approval.

Let me invite you this week to practice something... **Remember who you are and speak your true name to yourself.**

I am a child of God.

- I have all I need in Jesus.
- I am chosen.
- I am adopted and accepted.
- I am saved, forgiven, and sealed.

And if you're still unsure about Jesus...

- If you're in a place where you have questions or aren't sure what you believe... that's completely fine.

I just want you to know:

- This is the identity you're invited to experience.
- No matter who you are, what you've done, or where you've come from, God is offering to adopt you as his child... now and forever.
- All you have to do is say yes.

WHAT IF WE DID THIS: Can you imagine what life would look like if, instead of working so hard to meet our resolutions... we actually rested in the identity God has already given us?

What would happen to our guilt, fear, worry, and stress if we truly believed, day after day, that we are already enough because of Jesus?

- We'd finally live from the identity God already sees when he looks at us.

So... What would really change for you if you knew, deep down in your bones, that you are enough, b/c God has paid everything for you and refuses to let you go?

Today, and every day, you are invited to step into your true identity.

- To rest.
- To enjoy God.
- And to experience the life he offers you.

You can stop chasing a better you and rest in who you already are in Jesus.