

When I was in college I worked every summer for a concrete construction company. It was a rugged crew. I was the only person who had never been in jail, for instance. I was one of a few who could actually drive to work legally - without a suspended license. They swore like sailors and fistfights on the job site were not uncommon. These guys were all in great shape from working hard finishing concrete every day - big shoulders, strong arms. And then there was me.

The leader of our crew, the owner of the company, was an elder in our church. He was tough as nails, the hardest worker out there. He had a commanding presence. His name was Anthony Vargas, but no one called him Anthony.

When he was younger he was given a nickname and it stuck. He was the youngest in his family and the smallest, at the time. As he got older and bigger, the nickname from his early days stayed with him. So when this big, strong, tough guy walked on to the job site, everyone called him by the same name - DINK, or sometimes, DINKY.

I never really had a nickname, but some of you probably did. It's funny how they develop and how they can stick with you.

Sometimes, it's not so much of a nickname as a persona, an identity. Maybe some of you liked the way you were characterized by others. For some, it may have been painful.

We all know people who became known by one particular aspect of their appearance or personality - the bad girl, the fat kid, the bookworm, the class clown, the quiet one. Maybe some of you are still stuck with a label like this.

As we get older, we often try to create the identity we would prefer for ourselves. So we try to make ourselves seem more intelligent, or stylish. We do whatever we can to appear to others as if we are more wealthy or more accomplished than we really are.

John Ortberg calls this "impression management," and it's something we all engage in from time to time. In today's world of social media, impression management, or forming the identity we want for ourselves becomes even more tempting. Some people even develop an online identity or persona that is completely different from who they are in real life.

When most of us think about our identity, we realize that there are several overlapping identities or roles that we play that make up who we are. I am a husband to Rhesa, a dad to Braden and Elana, a leader at Orchard Group, a runner, a resident of New York, a Red Sox fan and so on.

You could quickly make your own list of the ways you most often identify yourself...

I want to make the case today that finding your identity FIRST in Christ makes life more satisfying in every way.

Now, some of you who are here today may not consider yourselves to be followers of Christ. You're not sure if you're ready to call yourself a Christian. We're glad you're here and I hope today's message will be helpful to you. By listening today you should have a better idea what it might mean for you to find your identity in Christ, to identify yourself with him.

For those of you who are Christians, I'm probably not going to be telling you anything you don't already know. I hope to remind you, though, that identifying yourself first and foremost as a follower of Christ impacts every area of your life and makes life more satisfying in every way.

So, what does it mean to find your identity in Christ?

One thing it means is that I am keenly aware of my own sin.

Romans 3:23-24 says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

I am a sinner, saved by the grace of God through Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast."

When I was 8 years old our family took a vacation with our whole extended family on the Storms side. All of my cousins were there. On Sunday we left our cabin and went to find a church to go to. That's what our family always did on Sundays on vacation.

So we found this little county church and filled up the last two pews at the back of the church. I was sitting next to my cousin, Blake, who was two years older. I always looked up to him and was constantly looking for ways to impress him. As soon as church was over I stood up on the pew, facing backwards, and yelled, "Hey, Blake, watch this!" Everyone in that tiny church heard me and turned to look. I attempted to impress him with my bravery and athleticism by jumping over the back of the pew. Unfortunately I caught the tips of my toes on the back of the pew and landed facefirst on the wood floor.

Blake wasn't impressed.

If I find my identity in Christ I begin to realize that my attempts to impress people generally fall flat. I'm a sinner, saved by grace and there's no room for boasting. The Bible says God opposes the proud and those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

Identifying with Christ means that I'm keenly aware of my own sin. It's a protection against thinking more highly of myself than I should.

Ironically, when we stop trying to impress other people, they tend to like us more, not less. And when I stop thinking of myself more highly than I should, I start treating others more graciously. I stop judging other people and start showing more empathy.

Jesus said, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3-4)

It's human nature to ignore our own sin and judge others, but it's not a fulfilling way to live.

It might sound negative to start out by saying that when we identify with Christ we are keenly aware of our own sin, but it's actually just the opposite. Being reminded of our own sin and God's grace that covers it, means I can stop trying to impress people who are likely to be all that impressed anyway. I can free myself from the need to appear as if I have it all together. I will show more kindness and compassion and forgiveness to others, knowing that I need all those things myself. I won't think more highly of myself than I should, and that should protect me from falling flat on my face too often.

Maybe that's why the Apostle Paul referred to himself as "chief among sinners." He wrote, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." (1 Timothy 1:15)

Finding your identity in Christ means being keenly aware of your own sin.

It also means that you're more loved than you even know.

Ephesians 3:14-19 says, "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

I pray that you will grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.

Even if you think you know how much God loves you, you still have no idea. His love surpasses our knowledge.

Even when you are keenly aware of your own sin and you are tempted to think there is no way God could love you given how badly you've messed up, God still loves you beyond what you can even comprehend.

Romans 8:38-39 says, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. You are more loved than you even know.

Think about the difference that makes.

When I feel like a horrible parent because I lost my temper and screamed at my kids, God still loves me, and I can start over.

When I've given in to the same temptation, again, God still loves me and I get yet another chance.

When I look in the mirror and see all of the reasons why I shouldn't be loved, I know that God sees past all that and loves me any way.

When I'm anxious about my work and feel unqualified, I know that God will love me whether I succeed greatly or fail miserably.

If I find my identity in Christ I am keenly aware of my own sin, and that keeps me humble. But I also know that I am deeply loved by God, and that gives me confidence.

Finally, if I find my identity in Christ I know that it's never as hopeless as it seems.

When I'm devastated by the news that I'm losing my job, there's still hope. When the person I love says they don't love me anymore, there's still hope. When the doctor comes in to share the bad news, there's still hope.

I'm not just talking about hope in some illusory sense. I'm talking about hope that is grounded in reality.

We tend to think that the normal order of things is that life inevitably leads to death. That everything in this world is on a slow march from beginning to end, from hope to hopelessness. From life to death.

But when you read the story of the world from God's perspective you find that we've got it all wrong. Backwards. God specializes in hopeless situations. The end is really just a new beginning. Death is just the necessary condition for bringing new life.

In the beginning there was darkness and void. God brought light and created life. When Abraham and Sarah were old and childless, God brought life to her barren womb. When Jesus was in the tomb and the disciples had given up, God raised Christ to back to life and brought back hope.

God does his best work when we're at the end of our rope.

For those of us who find our identity in Christ, baptism is the ultimate symbol.

Romans 6:3-4 says, "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? **4** We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

The Bible says that the same power that raised Christ from the dead is at work in you. With God, all things are possible. And that means it's never as hopeless as it seems. Yes, we may face seemingly insurmountable obstacles. For God, they are nothing. We may not see the light at the end of the tunnel, but God can bring light to even the darkest places. Even when death approaches, we know it's not the end of the story, but the beginning of life forever in the presence of God.

I love how C.S. Lewis ends the last book of his Chronicles of Narnia...

"All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

— [C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*](#)

When I think about my identity I realize that all of my life the label that's followed me around is "the responsible one." I'm the oldest child in my family and I was expected to set an example and keep the others in line, by being responsible. I was a good student and was rewarded for turning my work in on time and getting good grades. When I started dating I realized pretty quickly that the parents of the girls I was interested in liked me more than the girls themselves, because I was responsible. I couldn't get the girls to like me but their moms LOVED me! In my first jobs I was always praised for paying attention to the details and being responsible. When I was 26 years old I was given the opportunity to start this church probably, more than anything, because I was considered to be responsible.

I've realized over the course of my life that my identity can sometimes be a burden I want to escape and it can sometimes be an idol (security blanket) I want to cling to.

Think about your identity. Are there things that feel like a burden you want to escape? Are there things you are tempted to cling to for comfort?

One of the most freeing and satisfying gifts God has given us is the gift of knowing that before we are beholden to any identity, we belong to him.

So I'm asking you to begin thinking of yourself, first and foremost, as one who belongs to Christ above all else. To be keenly aware of your own sin. To know that you are loved more than you know. To believe that no matter how dark things get, it's never as hopeless as it seems.

Maybe you have never specifically taken the step to identify with Christ. Maybe you've never united yourself with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection through baptism as a believer. If you'd like to take that step we invite you to do so today.