

**Gracia a Vosotros ::** *desatando la verdad de Dios, un versículo a la vez*

## On Identity

Scripture: John 4:23; James 1:18

Code: B150901

*This week we're putting into practice some of the principles we covered last month in the Being a Berean series by comparing The Purpose Driven-Life and Slave, two books that speak to key facets in the Christian life. We're beginning with one of the fundamental issues of life—your identity.*

"The way you see your life *shapes* your life." [1] Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 41.

The question of identity looms large in the pages of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. To his credit, Rick Warren understands his audience, and attempts to answer many of the questions that plague the lives of twenty-first century men and women. And certainly one of the fundamental aspects of understanding your purpose in life is knowing *who you are*.

Throughout his book, Warren tries to help his readers view their identity from a heavenly perspective.

God was thinking of you even *before* he made the world. In fact, that's why he created it! God designed this planet's environment just so we could live in it. We are the focus of his love and the most valuable of all his creation. The Bible says, "*God decided to give us life through the word of truth so we might be the most important of the things he made.*" [James 1:18, New Century Version] This is how much God loves you and values you! [2] *The Purpose-Driven Life*, 24.

Warren positions man as the pinnacle of God's creative work, and as a source of great pleasure for Him. But he takes those truths too far, leaving readers with the impression that God glories in them, rather than impressing on them the need to glory in the Lord.

The moment you were born into the world, God was there as an unseen witness, *smiling* at your birth. He wanted you alive, and your arrival gave him great pleasure. God did not *need* to create you, but he *chose* to create you for his own enjoyment. You exist for his benefit, his glory, his purpose, and his delight.

Bringing enjoyment to God, living for his pleasure, is the first purpose of your life. When you fully understand this truth, you will never again have a problem with feeling insignificant. It proves your worth. If you are *that* important to God, and he considers you valuable enough to keep with him for eternity, what greater significance could you have? You are a child of God, and you bring pleasure to God like nothing else he has ever created. [3] *The Purpose-Driven Life*, 63.

To hear Warren tell it, we are endlessly captivating to the Lord—the objects of His tremendous sacrificial love. "If you want to know how much you matter to God, look at Christ with his arms outstretched on the cross, saying, 'I love you this much! I'd rather die than live without you.'" [4] *The Purpose-Driven Life*, 79.

That's a strange take on Christ's experience on the cross, but it's how Warren measures human dignity and value. In the economy of his theology, each person is a treasure that Christ went to great lengths to salvage. And as God's treasures, each of us is special and unique in our own way—in fact, it's our uniqueness that God prizes most of all.

You don't bring glory or pleasure to God by hiding your abilities or by trying to be someone else. You only bring him enjoyment by being you. Anytime you reject any part of yourself, you are rejecting God's wisdom and sovereignty in creating you. [5] *The Purpose-Driven Life*, 75.

That last statement swings wide open the door for everyone whose identity is grounded in their sin (the LBGT+ movement is just one example) to assert that God already loves them the way they are—that, in fact, He *made them* the way they are. Such careless, imprecise language undercuts the need for holiness and sanctification.

He compounds the problem later when he writes, "God wants you to be yourself. '*That's the kind of people the Father is looking out for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship.*'" [6] *The Purpose-Driven Life*, 103.

If that quote doesn't sound familiar, you're not alone. The verse Warren is referring to is John 4:23, which actually says, "But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers." Warren's quote comes from the Bible paraphrase, *The Message* (in all, Warren references fifteen different versions of the Bible, many of them obscure translations and paraphrases—he mistakenly sees this as a strength). By quoting *The Message*, he turns a verse about worshipping with wholehearted integrity into an affirmation that God just wants us to be ourselves.

As we'll see throughout this series, *The Purpose-Driven Life* plays fast and loose with Scripture. There's not much expositional content. Most of the time, Scripture is used to back up or illustrate Warren's points. And even then, the biblical content is deployed in the least helpful way possible. Actually citing the chapter and verse reference for a given passage is rare for Warren. Most of the time he simply asserts, "The Bible says. . ." In other places, the reader is given only visual cues (quotations in italics) that what he or she is reading is actually from God's Word—and only an endnote buried in the back of the book to point him to the verse reference.

I'm not sure what was the original intent of that layout decision, but it effectively dissuades the reader from further studying the verses Warren quotes, or attempting to understand them in their original context. In that sense, *The Purpose-Driven Life* is very easy to read, but very hard to study.

By contrast, John MacArthur's book *Slave* is steeped in the Berean mindset, as he works to help his readers understand what God's Word says about our identity in Christ, and what it means by what it says. The whole premise of the book is built around a concept that the modern church has largely sidestepped, and that twenty-first century society has no stomach for—slavery. His point is that softening the verbiage we use about our relationship to Christ has softened our understanding of what it means to follow Him.

Describing how first-century believers referred to themselves as "slaves of Christ," John explains:

Their self-identity had been radically redefined by the gospel. Whether slave or free in this life, they had all been set free from sin; yet having been bought with a price, they had all become slaves of Christ. That is what it means to be a *Christian*.

The New Testament reflects this perspective, commanding believers to submit to Christ completely, and not just as hired servants or spiritual employees—but as those who belong wholly to Him. We are told to obey Him without question and follow Him without complaint. Jesus Christ is our Master—a fact we acknowledge every time we call Him “Lord.” We are His slaves, called to humbly and wholeheartedly obey and honor Him.

We don’t hear about that concept much in churches today. In contemporary Christianity the language is anything but slave terminology. It is about success, health, wealth, prosperity, and the pursuit of happiness. We often hear that God loves people unconditionally and wants them to be all *they* want to be. He wants to fulfill every desire, hope, and dream. *Personal* ambition, *personal* fulfillment, *personal* gratification—these have all become part of the language of evangelical Christianity—and part of what it means to have a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” Instead of teaching the New Testament gospel—where sinners are called to submit to Christ—the contemporary message is exactly the opposite: Jesus is here to fulfill all *your* wishes. Likening Him to a personal assistant or a personal trainer, many churchgoers speak of a *personal* Savior who is eager to do their bidding and help them in their quest for self-satisfaction or individual accomplishment.

The New Testament understanding of the believer’s relationship to Christ could not be more opposite. He is the Master and Owner. We are His possession. He is the King, the Lord, and the Son of God. We are His subjects and His subordinates.

In a word, we are His *slaves*. [7] John MacArthur, *Slave*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010) 13-15.

According to John, our identity is not a function of our uniqueness—we are not precious snowflakes that elicit God’s smile through our mere existence. Instead, our identity is bound up in our relationship to Christ, and how He has purchased and transformed us through His sacrifice. Christ’s death did not *reveal* our value—apart from Him, we had none. Instead, our value is purely a function of our relationship with Him, as He redeemed us from our worthless state for His use in this life and an eternity of glorifying Him.

It’s a subtle but important difference between the two perspectives. And as we’ll see next time, it shapes how both authors explain the process of salvation.

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