**Thesis:** Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror long enough to have that mini-existential moment where you think: “Who am I really?”

For many of us, our sense of identity ebbs and flows with the various seasons of life as we grow and change with our surroundings.

Our interests change. Our priorities shift. Our relationships begin and end. When our circumstances and relationships are put under strain, it can bel easy to lose sense of who we are. In the midst of it all, it’s very easy to feel out of control.

But what if our identity could be much more stable?

Paul writes 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.”

It’s incredible what we’ll discover when we answer Jesus' call to follow Him. As we learn about Him, we’ll find that we have much to learn about ourselves, too.

**Introduction:** Welcome to The Jesus Podcast, a year of stories showcasing the depth of Christ’s love and the glory of God’s truth. I’m Zak, your host from Pray.com. I’m excited to be with you today as we begin a new study through 20 unique encounters Jesus had during His earthly ministry. These people all have different stories, struggles, and shortcomings. But what isn’t unique about each of these individuals is what society labeled them as: Outcasts.

Make sure to follow the podcast as we explore the transformative depths of God’s love made available to everyone.

**Context:** In our first story, we’ll be introduced to a man named Simon - but you may know him as Peter.

On the surface, Simon is a meager fisherman simply looking to make ends meet. But underneath, the weight of life’s struggles eat away at his sense of purpose.

With each passing day, the lull of repetition and failure, alongside the doubts of being able to provide for his family, brings a mixture of apathy and discontentment. Without thought, Simon allows the internal war of finding his own identity to spill out into resentment towards his brother, who seems to be finding purpose beyond life on the sea of Galilee. In a moment of what some might call coincidence, he meets Jesus, the promised Lamb of God. Though he may not have known it at the time, this initial encounter with Jesus would change the trajectory of his life for good. Come along to discover Peter’s story as we learn that true identity can only be found in following Jesus.

**Message:** In Matthew 4, we enter into some of the earliest moments of Jesus’ public ministry. Having spent the majority of His life as a humble carpenter in the lackluster city of Nazareth, Jesus is quickly gaining traction among the local community. It’s no wonder why this might be. According to Matthew 7:28-29, the crowds were amazed at His teachings because He taught as one with authority.

The message of the coming kingdom of God that Jesus shared was profound. It offered a deeper look into the human soul than the vapid and repetitive teachings of His contemporaries.

But Jesus offered more than in-depth teachings. He was paving the way for a revolution. It wasn’t a revolution of politics, coups, or violence. Nor was he making a bid at the throne to ascent to earthly power. The Jesus revolution was a radical transformation of how we view God, His kingdom, this world, and even ourselves.

As we saw in today’s story, Jesus spoke to the masses but deliberately ministered to individuals like Simon. Individuals who were on the fringe and felt forgotten. Individuals who identified as failures and outcasts. Even individuals who had no sense of identity at all.

**These were the ones Jesus personally called to follow Him, because He knew they were blank canvas He had to create masterpieces.** Where others see failure, Jesus sees opportunity. Where some see success, Jesus sees pride. Jesus doesn’t look at the world through our lens of success and failure. He looks deeper and into eternity, seeing beyond the accolades and straight into the heart.

When people have a self-determined mission or sense of identity, they’re often hesitant to relinquish control. The danger of finding purpose and identity ***within*** ourselves is that as quickly as we can build ourselves up, we can quickly be torn down. Maybe you lose your job, mourn the loss of a loved one, or struggle in a relationship. With each of these blows to the ego, our identity wavers until it’s bound to crumble.

We need a stronger foundation for our identities.

So how might we have a deeper sense of identity? Well, like Simon, it begins with looking towards Jesus. Think about the difference between that moment of looking at yourself in the mirror and the moment Simon gazed into the eyes of the Messiah. How quickly we can go from pondering, “Who am I?” to seeing everything we can be through Christ Jesus.

**Knowing God gives us a greater understanding of ourselves.** When we look at ourselves through God’s eyes, our purpose becomes clearer. When we anchor our identities in Christ, we feel less anxious and out of control. Who God is, and what he has called us to do, is a more firm and steady base to build our identities upon.

He’s not a God who looks down on us with disdain or frustration for our failures; He is a loving Father who looks at us with compassion and calls us His children. When we submit ourselves to following Jesus, we’re welcomed into His loving arms: The starting point of understanding who we really were meant to be.

As Peter contemplates the bleak night of fishing, he finds himself mulling over his purpose and identity. Since he attached his purpose to his profession, he inevitably associated his identity with his failure. He was so hard-set in his ways that he even turned a deaf ear to his brother, who spoke of possible hope of finding more in life.

**What Simon demonstrates for us is how ambivalence toward Jesus can hinder, if not prevent, our ability to admire Him.** Don’t be too quick to dismiss others when they want to share what God is doing in their lives. Andrew had a testimony to share, but Simon was too agitated and consumed with himself to listen. Simon needed to wake up to what was happening.

It wasn’t until Simon appreciated the significant role Jesus could play in his life that he turned his heart towards adoration. And all it took was a simple act of obedience.

At first, Simon was ambivalent about Jesus. But I love how he still had the attitude of “Nevertheless, let’s do it…” Sometimes, that’s all it takes. Faithless faithfulness. There’s something honest about this entire interaction. He isn’t sure what Jesus is up to, but he obeys nonetheless. God can do a lot with that. He can do a lot with our willingness to obey even when we’re irritated, doubtful, and tired.

So even in reluctance, Peter’s faithless faithfulness to obey the instruction of Jesus gave him the opportunity to witness a mere glimpse of Jesus’ power; and if Jesus could fill his empty nets, maybe He could fill his empty heart, if only given the chance. Surely if the stranger from Nazareth seemed to work with a greater purpose, even the lowly fisherman could too, if he would only follow in His footsteps.

We can trust that God has a special plan for each of our lives. While we may not know every detail of that plan, we can be sure that our purpose of following Jesus, being made more like Him, and glorifying Him along the way will never change.

And all it takes is our willingness to follow him with humble hearts of service and gratitude. Perhaps the plan isn’t exactly what we expect or even what we initially hoped for, but we can rest assured that God is in perfect control with every step.

**May we all experience the glorious intersection of God’s grace and our efforts**. We can cling tightly to the fact that there is a greater good God wants to accomplish in and through us while holding loosely to what that looks like precicely. You’re not supposed to know all the details. If you knew God’s plan - mapped out from beginning to end - you would just be looking for shortcuts. Jesus doesn’t want to show you the end-goal, he wants you to follow him. It doesn’t take great skill, eloquence, or charisma. It takes willing hearts and hands.

In our story we also met a fellow fisherman named John. This man would become another of Jesus’ disciples who would become a prolific leader in the early church. Eventually, he would write these words in **1 John 3:2**:

*“Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”*

We don’t know the specifics of how God will uniquely work in our individual lives, but each of us - from the most socially accepted to the furthest of outcasts - has been given the promise of being made like Jesus as we pursue Him. What a glorious purpose that is. A purpose that compels us onwards.

It may seem daunting to walk away from the life we know. Sure, Simon and Andrew’s nets were empty, but at least they knew that way of life and had another chance at it the next day. **But to see a change, we have to make a change.** **We have to stop looking inward to find purpose and identity and begin to look to Jesus.** We have to change our perception of what’s possible and believe that our God is a God of miracles. We have to look beyond the mundane to see the splendor of life with Jesus. So, I encourage you to allow Jesus into your life and leave nothing hidden from Him. The more you give Him, the more He will change you. God doesn’t want to improve you; he wants to give you a new life. And maybe, like Simon, we won’t be perfect. But a life of faith is not marked by perfection but by consistency. Receive God’s mercies that are new every morning and take that step of faith. Failure isn’t the end of faith, it’s part of the process. Follow Jesus and you just might be surprised at what you’ll find.