

Nothing Apart From Christ

A Biblical Call to Submission



Forward Nothing Apart From Christ

Christian submission is not first a technique of willpower or a ladder of moral improvement. It is the recognition that, before the crucified and risen Lord, the self has no independent claim. Scripture repeatedly names this condition with a stark word: nothing. Apart from Christ we can do nothing. In ourselves we are nothing. **All that once seemed gain is counted as loss**—as refuse—so that Christ may be gained. Submission to Jesus is the lived form of that confession.

The Biblical Grammar of Nothing

Jesus says it plainly and firmly: **“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5)**. This is not a pep talk. It is a statement about how life actually works. A branch does not create its own life; it receives life from the vine. Fruit comes only from staying connected. To submit to Christ is to stay in that dependence instead of acting as if we can live and bear fruit on our own. John the Baptist puts the same truth in the simplest words: **“He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30)**.

Paul makes the same truth painfully personal. Before he met Christ, he had every reason to feel important: the right family line, intense religious zeal, and a spotless record of keeping the law. After Christ, he looks at all of that and says he now counts it as loss—**even as garbage**—so that he may gain Christ and be found in him (**Philippians 3:7–9**). Later he can say of himself, with no false humility, **“I am nothing” (2 Corinthians 12:11)**. The apostle who worked harder than the others did so only because **“it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10)**. God has chosen **“what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1**

Corinthians 1:28–29). Submission here is not self-hatred; **it is telling the truth about ourselves.**

The same pattern is seen most clearly in Jesus himself. Though he was God, he “**emptied himself**, by taking the form of a servant... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (**Philippians 2:6–8**). He did not stop being God. He simply refused to cling to his equality with God or use it to his advantage. Instead, he chose the place of a servant. Paul then tells the church to have “this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” To submit to Christ is to share his way of laying himself down. We become “**nothing**” in this sense: we stop treating our status, our rights, and our plans as the most important things.

Jesus makes the same demand of every disciple: “If anyone would come after me, let him **deny himself** and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (**Luke 9:23–24**; cf. **Matthew 16:24–25**; **Mark 8:34–35**). The grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die if it is to bear fruit (**John 12:24–25**).

Theologically: Death to Self, Life in Another

This “**nothing**” does not mean the self is wiped out or that we stop caring. It means the self is given a new place. **We are no longer the center; Christ is.** “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (**Galatians 2:20**). “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (**Colossians 3:3**). The old self is crucified with him “in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (**Romans 6:6**). Those who belong to Christ “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (**Galatians 5:24**). We do not disappear. We die to the old way of living so that a new life in Christ can begin.

Theologically, this guards against two errors. One error is thinking we can make ourselves righteous or bear fruit by our own strength. Scripture says the opposite: “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (**2 Corinthians 4:7**). The **other error** is thinking we have nothing to do—that we just sit still and wait. That is not what the Bible teaches. The branch really does remain in the vine. The servant really does obey. The living sacrifice really is offered: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (**Romans 12:1**). We act, but the power and the glory are not ours. “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory” (**Psalms 115:1**). “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (**1 Corinthians 1:31**; see also **Galatians 6:14**).

The cross remains the measure. Jesus did not submit to an abstract principle of humility; **He submitted to the Father’s will**: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (**Luke 22:42**). Christian nothingness is therefore not generic lowliness. It is conformity to a particular Person who first became nothing for us. We submit because He first submitted, and **we empty ourselves because He first emptied Himself.**

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (**Matthew 11:29**).

The Practice of Nothing

In ordinary life this confession takes concrete form. Prayer that begins with “**not my will**” rather than a list of demands. Decision-making that treats personal preference as secondary to the mind of Christ discerned in Scripture and the church. Suffering that is received as participation in His sufferings rather than as an interruption of our projects: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness... For when I am weak, then I am strong” (**2 Corinthians 12:9–10**). Ambition that is relativized by the knowledge that every gift is held in trust. Even good works are offered with the awareness that they are “prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (**Ephesians 2:10**) and that any boast is excluded.

James states the posture simply: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you... **Humble yourselves before the Lord**, and he will exalt you” (**James 4:7–8, 10**). Peter echoes it: “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you” (**1 Peter 5:5–6**). The poor in spirit are already called blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (**Matthew 5:3**). The one who still clings to being “something” in his own right has not yet begun. “None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (**Romans 14:7–8**). “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (**Philippians 1:21**).

Conclusion

To speak of nothing in reference to submission to Christ Jesus is to recover the grammar of the gospel. We bring nothing that commends us. We contribute nothing that originates in ourselves. We are nothing apart from the vine. And precisely there—where the self stops grasping—Christ is all. The empty vessel is the one He fills. The crucified self is the one He raises. **The life that counts itself loss is the life that finds itself hidden in Him.**

This is not a counsel of despair. **It is the only path that leads to joy.** For the One to whom we submit is not a tyrant but the Servant who first became nothing so that we might become children of God. **In Him, our nothing is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of everything that lasts.** “Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (**Hebrews 12:2**).

