

What constitutes the good life? How can humans flourish? As Coop said last week, how can we have durable joy? It is the age-old question. In so many ways, it is what every human is after and what all humans have always been after. All people want to be happy. The drive to be happy underlies most human endeavors. Maybe you have heard the following: At age 4, happiness is... not peeing in your pants. At age 12, happiness is... having friends. At age 17, happiness is... having a driver's license. At age 35, happiness is... having money. At age 45, happiness is... having money. At age 65, happiness is... having a driver's license. At age 75, happiness is... having friends. At age 85, happiness is... not peeing in your pants.

Blaise Pascal famously said, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves."

All people want to be happy. But the word "happy" is a bit too shallow to use though. I prefer the more contemporary language of human flourishing. The Bible talks a lot about flourishing or happiness. Most often, the word is translated "blessed." Blessed simply means happy. Just think of the SOTM, the beatitudes: blessed are blessed are, blessed are. Jesus is teaching us how to flourish. Same word that is used in Ps 1: the blessed person is the one delights and meditates on the Word, like a tree planted by streams of water, bearing fruit, whose leaf does not wither, and prospers in all they do. Isn't that what you want?

The way of Jesus is the way to true flourishing, to happiness, to the good life. Justin Martyr called Christianity a "sure and fulfilling" philosophy of life. We have been walking through Paul's letter to the Philippians since August and I wanted to take a break to do sort of a summary sermon (921). We are a little past midway through, plus the next passage is a banger Easter passage so this week we pause to consider how Philippians teaches human flourishing. Btw - The American Institute of Church Growth surveyed 8K church attenders and asked why did they come: 1-2% had special needs, 2-3% walk ins, 5-6% influenced by the preacher, 2-3% liked some program, 1-2% visitation effort, 4-5% reached by SS, 0.5% TV programs, 75-90% through the influence of friends or relatives. Next week is Easter. People will be expecting an invite so take advantage! Invite people to church and next week, come in here as a missionary. There will be people here next week that are at a watershed moment and God can use your words to set them on the right trajectory for all eternity.

One of the main themes of Philippians is joy. Paul commands us to rejoice **1:18, 2:17, 18, 2:28, 3:1, 4:4, 4:10**. He mentions joy 5x: **1:4, 25, 2:2, 29, 4:1**. It is one of the main themes of the letter. God wants our joy. God wants you to be happy more than you want to be happy and he knows you can only be happy in Him. Lewis writes of that "deep, strong, unshakable, kind of happiness, God intends for us."<sup>1</sup> Augustine was right: our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. Christianity is the way to human flourishing because it is what it is made for. You need to know the design instructions to get to the right purpose. A flyswatter is not meant to be a backscratcher. CS Lewis talks about our fallen tendency to try to be our own god. He says humanity tries to "invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history - money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery - the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy. The reason why it can never succeed is this. God made us: invented us as a man invents a machine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human race to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."<sup>2</sup>

The way to flourishing is through *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is a Greek idea that refers to practical wisdom. It was often used by the ancient Greeks. It is a type of wisdom or intelligence relevant to practical action. And Paul picks it up: Rom 8:5-6: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds (φρονέω) on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds (φρονέω) on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind (φρόνημα) on the Spirit is life and peace.”<sup>3</sup> Paul’s language here is about more than just our thinking but also a person whose “patterns and habits of thinking, feeling, and acting are oriented toward fleshly pleasures and desires rather than the life of God.”<sup>4</sup>

*Phronesis* is communal discernment toward a shared mindset. A mindset of practical wisdom. Remember that this is a big theme in Philippians. Paul uses his word for mindset 23X and 10 of them are in Phil.<sup>5</sup> The word is φρονέω. It refers to a mindset: thinking, attitudes, dispositions, and emotions. One author says, “A mindset is a frame of reference, a lens for seeing the world and assessing it. The believer’s mindset is to be shaped by the gospel and by Christ’s own ‘mindset’ (2:5).”<sup>6</sup> *Phronesis*. This mindset is a mental map, a world view.<sup>7</sup>

This is all very similar to ancient Greek virtue ethics, which focuses on becoming a certain type of person, learning practical wisdom and a way of being in the world that results in flourishing.<sup>8</sup> That is what the NT is after: becoming certain types of persons, people of a particular sort learning practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and a way of being in the world that results in flourishing. That way is the way of Jesus.

I want to ask 5 questions from Philippians specifically to see how what its vision of the flourishing life is. Questions that every person must answer and grapple with. If you are not a Christian, I encourage you to consider your answers, and how they measure up to this ancient letter’s. Christians, I encourage you to digest these questions and also use these questions with you non-Christian friends:

**1. Who are we?** What are people? The ancient philosopher Aristotle says that flourishing requires knowing what the function of a human is since the good of a man resides in the function of man.<sup>9</sup> So, what is man? Another age-old question that is of particular importance today. The letter to the Philippians doesn’t add anything new but assumes the rest of the Bible. We are created by God, made in the image of God. We are body and soul. Our bodies are a gift. We are sinners. Sin has infected everything. Now we rebel against our Creator. Our problem is sin not a syndrome. But God hasn’t left us there. If we have trusted Christ, we are sinners who have been forgiven. Counted R **3:9**. So we are sinners who through Christ have a right standing with God. We are secure in him.

We are the covenant people of God. Remember from several weeks ago, we are the circumcision - **3:3**. God had commanded Abraham to circumcise his offspring to mark them out as the people of God. We are the people of God. Gal 3:29: if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham’s offspring – heirs of the promises. That is who we are.

We are a people in process. We are becoming. We are works in progress. We are being made new. **3:10**. This is the purpose of our redemption. Knowing and becoming like Christ in his death. Cruciformity: being formed by the cross, being shaped by the self-giving love of Christ.

Christ is making us new. Lewis: “In Christ a new kind of man appeared: and the new kind of life which began in Him is to be put into us.”<sup>10</sup> We are becoming and therefore we are different. As the people of God, we have been called out of the world. The word for church is *ekklesia*, from the verb *kalēō*, which means to call. We are the called-out ones. We are a subversive contrast society. We are different from the world. **2:14-15**. Or in 1:27, Paul uses a civil term for the church. We are to live as worthy citizens of the gospel of King Jesus. Recall that

Philippi was a Roman colony that took citizenship very seriously. Well, Paul says, don't worry as much about that. Live as a worthy gospel citizen. **3:20**.

Who are we? Creatures made in the image of our Creator, fallen but forgiven in Christ, being transformed into his image as the people of God together. Contrary to the air we breathe, you are so much more than your own subjective feelings. That path won't lead to joy, but only depression and despair. Following your own heart is like hiring a blind guide to tour the Grand Canyon. Won't end in human flourishing. We are made for so much more, a higher purpose, which leads to our second question:

**2. What is the highest good**, the aim, the purpose of humanity, the supreme good? This is a key ingredient to the good life. One cannot have true flourishing without some highest good and it won't last if your life is not built on *the* highest good. Aristotle called it *eudaimonia*. Cicero called it the *summum bonum*. The ultimate stoic good is to live according to nature for self-preservation. For the Epicureans, it is pleasure or the avoidance of pain. Pop psychology has no supreme good. Here is how the Roman philosopher Cicero put it, "What is the end, what is the ultimate and final goal, to which all our deliberations on living well and acting rightly should be directed?"<sup>11</sup> He goes on to say, "Ignorance of the supreme good, however, is necessarily equivalent to ignorance of how to plan one's life . . . Once, however, we understand the highest ends, once we know what the ultimate good and evil is, then we have a path through life, a model of all our duties, to which each of our actions can thereby be referred (5.15). We must know the supreme good for the good life.

Aristotle says the same. "It is clear that this one ultimate End must be the Good, and indeed the Supreme Good. Will not then a knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of life? Will it not better enable us to attain what is fitting, like archers having a target to aim at?"<sup>12</sup> There must be a target, a goal, an end zone, a telos, a *summum bonum*. There will not be human flourishing without an ultimate good larger than yourself, and also – it must be real. What is it?

Christianity has the supreme good. It is encapsulated well in the WLC starts by answering this foundation question: "Q. 1. What is the chief and highest end of man? A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever." That is the exact right way to start a catechism. Augustine said that God is the highest good, the "source of our bliss. . . and the goal of our striving." Only in communion with God can human lives be brought to fulfillment.<sup>13</sup> But Philippians helps us be even more specific regarding humanity's highest good? It is Christ. Having Christ preached **1:18**. Seeing Christ honored: **1:20**. Living for Christ **1:27a**. Seeing Christ glorified **2:10-11**, Knowing Christ **3:7-10, 14**. Waiting for Christ **3:20-21**. Our worth and value is found in Christ. He is our supreme good!

But that is not all. If Christ is humanity's highest good, then part of our supreme good, our ultimate aim is making Christ known. **1:12** - προκοπή – Gospel advancement. / If Christ is our highest good, then the main purpose of life is knowing him – more and more. Being progressively conformed into his image. **1:9-11, 25** (προκοπή), **3:13-14**. Christ is our supreme good! Historian Robert Wilken writes, "Whether the term is *perfection* or *holiness*, the New Testament presents Christian faith as life oriented toward an end, toward a goal, what in the language of ancient moral philosophy was called the final good, the *summum bonum*."<sup>14</sup>

**3. What story are we a part of?** Contemporary philosopher Aliadair MacIntyre "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" The question of our metanarrative, our grand story, is related to the highest good. Where is the world headed? Is there anything grander than our own little lives? I sure hope so. GKC: how much larger your life would be if your self would get smaller in it! The narrative of Scripture has four main plot movements: Creation Fall Redemption Restoration. God created the world good, humanity opted for its own rule rather than God's rule

and plunged the whole world into sin. But God didn't give up on us. Instead, he begins his plan of redemption. He forms a people and from that people sends a Servant King to bring about a new covenant, providing forgiveness of sins and inward transformation. He sends his Spirit to launch a new people and by faith in Christ, we join that people. Now, we await the restoration, the redemption of our bodies and indeed of the whole world: **3:20-21**.

Our grand story explains the origin, the problem, the goal, and gives hope, which is so important for the good life. But speaking of the problem:

**4. Why is flourishing hard to come by?** Hardly anyone is flourishing. No one is happy. Every age group, financial bracket, and circumstance. Since the year 2000, suicide rates are up 34%. One third!<sup>15</sup> **3 Graphs**.<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Haidt recently released a book called *The Anxious Generation* showing how one major factor in this tragic trend is the shift from play-based childhoods to phone-based childhoods. We have more health, wealth, comforts, and technology than any generation – and yet we are the anxious generation. Why?

Sin. We live in a fallen world. Genesis chapter 3. Creation *Fall*. The world is not the way it is supposed to be. And the problem is not just outside of us though, inside as well. Philippians calls it the flesh: 3:3 we put no confidence in the flesh. The flesh is that perspective of one's identity and status that is at odds with God's perspective. The flesh is still around, at odds with the Spirit. There is the flesh, but also selfishness ambition and vain glory **2:3a, 21a**. We too often live for the self rather than for Christ. That never leads to flourishing. It is like expecting a pleasant experience at the DMV. Prepare for dissatisfaction. Selfish ambition is a dead-end path, filled with potholes that make Abilene roads look flawless.

Then there is death. Life is a mist, soon to vanish. Many people can't be happy in this life because they dread its end – rightly I might add – outside of Christ. Every vision of the good life must grapple with death. Which vision provides the most resources for dealing with death? Sociologist Peter Berger says this about the purpose of religion: "The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it."<sup>17</sup>

Well, for Christians, those whose only gain is Christ, death is gain because we get more of Christ. **1:21-23**. So, we need not fear death. We don't delight in it, but we need not dread it. The worst thing that can happen to a person – death – is the best thing for the believer. So we can live without fear. All the various fears in the world are ultimately rooted in the fear of death. Like the Kevin Bacon phenomenon – 6 degrees of Kevin Bacon, every single Hollywood actor can be connected to a role with Bacon in 6 steps or less. Same with the various phobias of the world: all connect to *thanatophobia*: the fear of death. Sin, flesh, and death make happiness hard to attain.

**5. What is the path to the good life?** First thing first, we must find forgiveness. Something must be done about this dreaded guilt, which hangs over us. We need righteousness and the gift of the gospel is that God grants what he demands - **3:9**. Being declared in the right is the foundation upon which we built. It is the standing from which we walk the path. And God has also given us the Spirit. We worship by the Spirit with new hearts, circumcised hearts, in fulfilment of the promise of Deut 30:6: "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." / And he promises to help us along the way - **1:6, 2:13**. So we have what we need to walk the path. What is the path? Let me mention 7 steps toward the good life specifically from this letter.

1. *Phronesis*: We should organize the entirety of your life around Christ as the primary goal. Adopt a singular preoccupation. As one NT scholar puts it, adopt "a new way of thinking, making value judgments, and cultivating emotions that takes its starting point from Christ as humanity's supreme good."<sup>18</sup> All else subordinated.

I mentioned at the beginning that the path is *phronesis*: the practice is having the right mindset. Transformed thinking. We need practical wisdom. We need to have a mental evaluation. Renewed view of the world. Practical wisdom. Right thinking that leads to right living. Paul uses a similar word three times in **3:7-8**. We must reframe our imagination and think/consider/count all as loss and Christ as gain. It is adopting a mental evaluation that rejects worldly ambition and achievements for the sake of pursuing Christ and being spiritually transformed into the image of Christ. A mindset focused on Christ. The mindset of *Christ* - 2:5 One NT Scholar writes, "Paul uses Christ's pattern of thinking and acting – Christ's [*phronesis*] – as the basis on which the Philippians are to reason and make judgments."<sup>19</sup> This involves a change of thinking, a change of perspective, a renewed social imagination, a realignment of worth, identity, and values.

2. The second practice is cruciformity. What does that mean? Being cross-shaped. **2:3-8**. / The good life is the others-focused life (1:21-26, 2:3-4, 2:21).<sup>20</sup> The discipline of positive psychology is summed up with three words: "Other People Matter."<sup>21</sup> Happiness comes when we seek the happiness of others.

3. The third essential ingredient to the good life is related: community **1:27-28**. / Surround yourself with people consumed with Christ. Break bread together on the regular. Food releases oxytocin, the bonding hormone. Surround yourselves with Christ-centered examples: Jesus, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Paul - **3:17**. NT Scholar Julien Smith writes, "Paul is calling them to cultivate the virtue of *phronesis* – practical wisdom, prudence, or 'moral insight' – after the pattern of Jesus' own *phronesis*. The virtue of *phronēsis* enables one to deliberate well between multiple seemingly good choices to arrive at a course of action leading to a good end. Acquiring the virtue of *phronesis* requires (as do all the moral virtues) both habituation and the examples of virtuous friends to follow."<sup>22</sup>

4. The fourth practice is generosity – **1:7**. This is a financial partnership. Philippians is a thank you letter for their generosity. **4:18**. Contrary to the worldview of materialism or consumerism, happiness doesn't come from accumulation but generosity. Money doesn't lead to happiness.<sup>23</sup> What did Cooper say: that will lead to the need for "just a little more." No, as St. Francis put it, in giving, we receive.

5. Embrace suffering **1:29**. Jesus: "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The Stoics agree, and even modern psychological research shows that the key to handling adversity is learning how to rightly appraise one's difficult circumstances. Paul repeatedly reappraises adverse circumstances both as an environment that cultivates character growth and where Christ's power is revealed.<sup>24</sup>

6. Fight for contentment. Don't commit the "arrival" fallacy, which is the phenomenon that once you achieve your goals, then happiness you thought would arrive and last proves surprisingly fleeting.<sup>25</sup> This is related to generosity, since to be give of your resources, one must be content with having less. **4:11-13**.

7.<sup>26</sup> Practice gratitude – the good life is the grateful life. Kids, have you seen Peter Rabbit? Remember the rooster. Be like the rooster. He crows and then is astonished. "The sun rose again. I can't believe it. Last night when I closed me eyes I thought that was it. We have another day. No way." Gratitude is a key ingredient to happiness. Increasingly, the social sciences are recognizing and pushing this fact. For example, a recent Forbes article concludes this way: "Being as consciously and continuously grateful as possible gives you a pathway toward more positivity and contentment."<sup>27</sup>

Dozens of studies show that gratitude leads to: increased feelings of energy, alertness, enthusiasm, and vigor; success in achieving personal goals, better coping with stress, a sense of closure in traumatic memories, bolstered feelings of self-confidence, solidified and secure social relationships, generosity and helpfulness, prolonging of enjoyment produced by pleasurable experiences, improved cardiac health through increases in

vagal tone, greater sense of purpose and resilience.<sup>28</sup> Gratitude is the new prescription for fighting depression. But without God, this can only go so far.<sup>29</sup>

Grateful people don't grumble. In fact, grumbling is a sure sign of a lack of gratitude. **2:14.** If entitled to everything, then thankful for nothing. / 7 steps on the path to human flourishing from Philippians: phronesis, cruciformity, community, generosity, suffering, contentment, and gratitude.<sup>30</sup> Augustine: "There can be no better good, no happier happiness than this: life for God, life from God, who is the well of life, in whose light we shall see light."<sup>31</sup>

**Benediction:** God be with you till we meet again, daily showing you the path to the good life: phronesis: the practical wisdom that is centered on Jesus Christ as your supreme good.

<sup>1</sup> Mere, 73.

<sup>2</sup> Mere

<sup>3</sup> Rom 12:3: "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think (φρονέω) of himself more highly than he ought to think (φρονέω), but to think with sober judgment."

<sup>4</sup> Jipp 123.

<sup>5</sup> Harmon, 89n54.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, 66.

<sup>7</sup> Harmon, 88 Matt Harmon writes, "The verb speaks of one's frame of reference for life, what we today might refer to as a world view. It is a way of evaluating the world around us and acting in a manner consistent with that mindset."

<sup>8</sup> Pennington, *SOTM and Human Flourishing*, 40.

<sup>9</sup> NE 1097b25-29.

<sup>10</sup> Mere, 57.

<sup>11</sup> *On Moral Ends* 1.11.

<sup>12</sup> NE, 1094a19-25.

<sup>13</sup> Wilken, 274.

<sup>14</sup> *Spirit*, 272.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/depression-rates-by-age-young-people-2019-3>

<sup>16</sup> <https://jonathanhaidt.com/anxious-generation/> ; <https://www.axios.com/2024/03/20/world-happiness-america-low-list-countries> (tumbled 8 spots in 2024)

<sup>17</sup> *The Secret Canopy*, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Jipp, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Jipp, 132.

<sup>20</sup> Jipp writes, Paul "seeks to cultivate communities that live together in mutuality, equality, and brotherly love. As such, the primary ethic for the church is a commitment to the virtue of love – love as embodied in the self-giving and self-lowering Christ. Love manifests itself in a willingness to have constant regard for one another, even to the point of giving up one's rights or privileges for the sake of a brother or sister." 200

<sup>21</sup> Peterson, *primer in Positive Psychology*, 249.

<sup>22</sup> Wilken, 53.

<sup>23</sup> Harvard longitudinal study: \$75K.

<sup>24</sup> Jipp, 232.

<sup>25</sup> Kaczor, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Could add 8<sup>th</sup>: Worship in All of Life with “offering” language.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tracybrower/2021/04/25/gratitude-is-a-key-to-happiness-4-reasons-why/?sh=3303ae5c347c>

<sup>28</sup> Kaczor, 92. **See 103.**

<sup>29</sup> Another secular psychologist writes, “With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives. In the process, people usually recognize that the source of that goodness lies at least partially outside themselves. As a result, being grateful also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals — whether to other people, nature, or a higher power.” <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

<sup>30</sup> Wilken, writes “Christian life is trinitarian, oriented toward God the supreme good, formed by the life of Christ, and moved toward the good by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.” 278.

<sup>31</sup> Wilken, 73. See 273a, See Jipp 240-41 conclusions