

Pray...

Oxford Professor C.S. Lewis once said:

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before...you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature.”

– C.S. Lewis, [Mere Christianity](#)

In a broad sense, this Oxford professor was talking about choices – the sum of which make up your character. Imagine if, when you woke up tomorrow, you did not see your physical appearance, but you saw your character. Either that heavenly creature or hellish creature described above. And what if you showed up at school and walking around were a bunch of creatures who looked like their character? That girl who you thought was a little computer nerd might be an [angelic giant](#). And the super popular drama dude with the perfectly quaffed hair and beard just might look like [Gollum](#). [Video](#)

Character is the sum of our actions. It is who we are over time. It is our choices multiplied. And it develops over time, in community, through adversity. Some people think sports develops character. But UCLA classic basketball coach John Wooden disagrees.

[Sports does not develop character. Sports reveal it. – John Wooden](#)

So, I am out on the driving range and three guys about twenty pull up next to me and two of them were teaching the third guy. The third guy was totally insecure, but insecure in a way that he totally powered up. He whiffed over and over – like every beginner. He got mad at his own incompetence. He yelled at his two coaches. He quit three times, threw his club down twice and shot out a flurry of f-bombs that would even make Charlie Sheen blush. And that was all in ten minutes. I thought about saying “Dude, there are other words in the English language.” In short order, I could tell that this guy had horrible character. And it is amazing how much you can sniff it out. Maybe C.S. Lewis’ picture is more obvious than we think.

I don’t know about you, but if I showed up every day on stage looking like my character, I’d be incentivized to shape up. Because everybody could see. But I should be incentivized anyway because character is connected so deeply to flourishing, or the shalom life that God intends for us. We are focusing on Shalom or flourishing for six weeks and this is our theme verse. [Psalm 115:14 May the LORD cause you to flourish, both you and your children.](#) Tattoos are available in the hallways... ask someone how to use them if this is new for you.

We have been discussing key aspects of flourishing this month... not just the fact that God wants you to flourish, but four keys to flourishing in our culture

[Flourishing Diagram 1](#) – Groups – Men of God, deeper, adult groups, student ministry... Divine Encounters – every day, every week, transformational moments. Let me just ask “How are we doing?” Have you found community to connect with? If not, git er done this week. Have you taken time for

divine encounters this week? Are you focusing on God's character and beauty? It is key to flourishing. And this week, the next key is character.

- 1) Character is critical to the flourishing life
 - a. You can only flourish when your inner world matches your outer world
 - i. And when your home life matches your public life
 - ii. Let me ask this challenging question – is there anyone in your home who would say the persona that you have at church is different than what they see at home? If so, then you have a character issue worth addressing. If there is something in your even more private life – your internet life or your travelling life – that disconnects from your public persona, then that might be a cause for pause. Because a popular definition of character is “Who you are when no one is looking.” And you only flourish if who you are when no one is looking is who you are when everyone is looking.
 - b. Excellent Character leaves a broad wake of impact
 - i. I was struck by that two weeks ago in a funeral service for Doug Durbin. He has been a CCC guy for about four years, but a follower of Jesus his whole life. He was 86... we had the funeral in the chapel because to be frank, most 86 year olds have already lost half of their friends! But that chapel was packed out. 250 people showed up. From here, from his last church, from neighborhoods, family and a bunch from the workplace – Harry Koch insurance – where he had worked for 60 years. This group was his legacy. Their lives will long outlast his, but have been deeply marked. And what they talked about most was not his high intelligence or low golf handicap... what they talked about was his character. His love, his kindness and gentleness. How he mentored them into flourishing and how they hope to grow up to be like him.
 - c. Character pays back in trust – which is the currency of flourishing. When you just do right consistently. When you act right. When people see your love. When you don't gossip, so the people who you are talking TO will know that you won't gossip about THEM. When you are generous and tender... people trust you and give you loyalty for leading them further. Character is amazing for business, for family and for your lifelong trajectory. Character matters.

There is a passage in the Bible that unpacks some of the keys to character development and its connection to flourishing. It may be familiar to many – but I'll bet there are some new aspects when it comes to shalom that you have never seen before. Philippians 4...

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

- a. Notice that it begins with the LORD – rejoice in the lord, the lord is near. Character does not come from self will, self help, getting better, growing stronger. It is not a “trying” as much as a “yeilding” The Holy Spirit wants to flow through you... he can live the life you never can. Let him! so many preachers, authors and self-help gurus have taught a simple idea “DO BETTER” – plan more, work harder, focus better, structure strategically, manage time... and you will get better. This is not the gospel. The gospel is not about effort, but yielding.

Yielding to the Spirit of the LORD and allowing him to FLOW through you. When you are changed by Jesus you automatically do the right thing because it is his christ life flowing in your veins... When you rejoice in the lord. When you know of his nearness, you can't help but be in touch with the flow of the Holy Spirit and become more like him!

- b. Doug Durbin – who had the funeral ten days ago was a guy who let God's spirit flow through him. He was a model of character and especially gentleness. His family told me a story of a Tornado that struck their home in 1975. He and his son Scott hid in the basement until the Tornado had passed. When they came up the stairs, Doug saw all of their belongings strewn about the first floor and said "Oh, mom is not going to be happy about this." Then he looked up and saw the roof missing and said "Oh, I guess Mom won't really care about that!" Their land line still worked post tornado when it rang with the roof off their house he answered: and his daughter, Jill Bretsen, heard her insurance agent dad say "I am so sorry that there was damage to your home from the high winds. I am in the middle of my home with no roof on it, so I'll be happy to get back with you tomorrow about your claim."
- c. Doug was someone who exemplified the next verse too.

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Gratitude

Did you know you can live life without anxiety? As your trust in God grows and your connection to him deepens, you realize that he is in charge of EVERYTHING. And you don't have to worry about it. So go to him with everything in prayer and your character will deepen.

Oh, and don't forget the thanksgiving. In fact, secular research galore makes the connection between gratitude and flourishing. "Count your blessings" is not just a proverb from grandma, it is a key to life success. And it impacts the people around you too!

And Berkely University says that: Gratitude is a 'gateway drug' to better mental health –

- At Berkeley, students who struggled with mental health wrote a gratitude letter and a control group wrote about their negative emotions. They did a general optimism check on everyone at four week intervals and The gratitude letter people had better optimism in checkpoints four and twelve weeks later! (and it didn't matter if they sent the letter.)
- Gratitude is the single greatest factor to create the most benefit in a short period of time for mental health (flourishing) according to the Harvard Study on Human Flourishing
- Why?
 - Gratitude focuses you on what you DO have, not what you don't have
 - Gratitude unshackles you from negative emotions
 - It is impossible to be grateful and resentful at the same time
 - Gratitude is a gateway drug to positive behavior, which creates and upward spiral –
 - positive thinking improves romantic relationships,
 - attracts friends who are positive,
 - increases self esteem, and even makes you more generous.

- I thought about that romantic relationships part, cuz I was skeptical... but then I thought about it. Would I rather be romantic with a grateful person or a resentful person? You too? So I was really grateful to Kelle all week long!
- And here in church, Singing songs of gratitude weekly reshapes your brain over time

⁷ And the **SHALOM** of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Shalom Baby! SHAAAA_LOM! The wholeness, peace and flourishing of God is your reward. You want to flourish? Try gratitude and gentleness... but that is not all, the passage continues. It flows from your connection to God into your thinking...

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of **Shalom** will be with you

First of all, notice the promise at the end. The God of Shalom will be with you. The flourishing God. The God who wants you to experience life to the full. How do you get more of that? Thinking and practice. The Philippians 4:8 test: What are you thinking? Look at the list **TRUE, NOBLE, RIGHT, PURE, LOVELY, ADMIRABLE, EXCELLENT, PRAISEWORTHY.**

Notice that while Eastern Religions, such as Zen Buddhism, focus on emptying the mind and focusing on nothingness, Christian meditation is all about filling the mind with goodness. Ask yourself the question – is this what you think about? Really?

- It is safe to say that when you are thinking about God, you are thinking about these things.
- When you focus on nature you are thinking on these things
- It can be the case that when you are doing yardwork, housework, food preparation or excelling at business you are thinking these things
- When you create beautiful art or compete in sports this can be the case. Not always but in bounds.
- But what about... the things you fill your mind with. Or the things that advertisers or movie makers or video games want to put in your brain. Could any of it be considered **FALSE, TRASHY, WRONG, IMPURE, UGLY, TRIVIAL, VIOLENT, IMMORAL**
- Now, everybody has thoughts from this list and thoughts from that list. The goal is to get more from this list.
 - Guys, I am not going to call out particular media games or shows, but evaluate what you are putting into your mind. If you are staying up late playing a first person shooter game online – blowing people’s heads off for entertainment, does it pass the Philippians 4:8 test?
 - If you are watching porn videos, which list does that belong on?
 - If you are into horror movies, which list typifies it?
 - If you are reading romance novels with trashy fantasies, where does it belong?
 - If you are watching cable news shows for multiple hours a day that poison you into thinking that anyone who disagrees with you is an idiot, which side are you filling your mind with?

- If you are messing around with crystals, seances, numerology, astrology, spells, charms, which category are you in?
- Friends, I am just saying it is hard to sin when your mind is filled with stuff that is true and beautiful and good.
- And... it is hard to connect with the divine resources of God when your mind is filled with violence, horror and sexual immorality. When you focus on stuff that is untrue or not admirable. It is tremendously difficult to flourish when this is the case. A flourishing life is connected to your thought life. What you feed in your mind, grows in your soul and is demonstrated in your life.
- Your thoughts determine your practices. It is all about intentionality. My dream here is not to control your private behavior. It is to teach you the path to flourishing. And your thoughts open that pathway or close it. The Holy Spirit flows freely into the minds of those who think admirable thoughts.!

Second, begin to practice. Paul says – whatever you have seen or heard in ME – do that. Practice it. Now, that is bold. Can you say that to your disciples? If not, what do you need to change? If you are new to the Christian faith, you need to find people to imitate. People who have studied the Bible daily for years. People who are enamored with God. People who prioritize acts of faith. People who are generous with money. People who love freely. People who don't care a person's status or position, but just love because they were created in God's image.

Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible. CS Lewis

Begin to practice. Practice encouragement. Practice forgiveness. Practice giving people the benefit of the doubt. And when you are in private, be sure that you choose to be as pure as if you were being watched.

Start when you are young and when you have nothing... because it gets harder the more you have to lose.

Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a Man's character, give him power. – Abraham Lincoln

What if there is a character gap? What if you don't think God's thoughts? What if you don't practice your faith in a faithful way? God gives you pathways to reconcile with him from where you are

- Confess to God. Confession in its simplest form is just agreeing with God. "God, you are right. My propensity to violent video games really is hurting my soul and nursing a violent bent toward your beloved creation." It makes sense if you imagine NOT agreeing with God. "Nope God, I am smarter than you... I can think any evil thoughts I want, feed my brain garbage and I am A-OK." Well, no room for God's healing there. The Bible says if you confess to God, he will forgive - he wants it, but you have to want it too. The door is wide open.

- Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
² Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.
- ³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. ^[b]
- ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Confession – to God is like taking out the trash. It feels so good, gets rid of the stench, etc. Confessing to others is like turning on the light in the closet.

- Confess to each other. Confession to God is good, but confessing to a person is better. Why? Because it flushes sin out of the darkness and into the light. You say it out loud and it loses its power. Just like mold dies in the sunlight but festers in dark basements, so does sin. When we confess to a person it is out in the open and can be dealt with.

Confession and brain science

- Reduces anxiety – your unresolved guilt goes away... that bones wasting away thing goes down.
- Clears your conscience – when God forgives you, it is finished! You can know that in the heavenly realms your sins are gone! Removed...Scientific American Magazine's Dr. James Pennebaker writes about a clear connection between confession of sin and sleep quality, citing a dozen different studies. (which also makes me ask... if I was the 12 one and 11 all came to the same conclusion, would I say "lets do a study to see if confession leads to better sleep!) In fact, this became so interesting that one study took people with insomnia and had them confess falsely – to things they DIDN'T do... just to see if it helped their sleep. It didn't sorry insomniacs. By the way, have you ever heard about the agnostic, dyslexic, insomniac? He stayed up all night wondering if there was a DOG.
- Allows you and others to move on – if you confess to the person you hurt. Repair can begin. Community is inspired.
- Repent. Repent just means to change your mind. Don't keep doing the same dumb things. I love when someone says "I have been sober for 120 days...or 8 years." They are marking the day that they changed their mind – and how they are flourishing as a result. If you are in bad habits, you gotta decide to change
- Counseling and renewal – here at CCC, we have Citylight Counseling with professionals who can help you change to healthy behaviors if you confess and repent. OR, we have Tuesday renewal groups that we would love for you to join!
- Go back to your thoughts. The reason you messed up is not just because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time. It is because your thoughts have been dwelling in the wrong place. Doing noble things is far easier if you have been thinking about noble things.

Character is more important than circumstances. You can never control what the world does to you, but you can control how you respond. And that will determine your destiny. – Mark Ashton

Seriously, Mark. Nice thoughts about character. But when I go out of church, what is my application? What do I DO?! Focus on your thoughts and it will lead to Shalom.

d. Build Thoughts that accelerate practices, then patterns, then character and shalom lifestyle

- e. The church will help!
 - i. When you get in Community, character flourishes – because you get to practice. People love you, but they also wound you betray you and sometimes tell you the truth about you. Sanctification always happens in community.
 - ii. Bible Studies teach you about connecting to God and his standards of morality
 - iii. Serving selflessly makes you more like Jesus too and opportunities to serve the poor or serve one another abound in the church
- f. But build into your thoughts, practice things that are good and your habits will turn into character qualities to turn into shalom for you and those around you.