

## Flourishing – Contribute

Good Morning! I am thankful to Mark for his generous introduction. He has been and continues to be an amazing encourager in my life. Without his encouragement I would not be standing on this platform today!

Let's pray before we begin.

I'm so glad you are joining us this morning as we continue in the 4th of a series on Flourishing. As a reminder or if you are here for the first time let me explain why we chose a series on Flourishing. This series was prompted by a Harvard Study by Dr. Tyler VanderWheele, on why people flourish.

Researchers created a system for measuring flourishing in five areas, happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character, and close social relationships. In the research they suggest four major pathways, Family, Education, Work and Religious Community that have large effects on flourishing outcomes. The findings of the study have revealed that religious people have a greater sense of well-being, live longer, and have more satisfaction in all areas of life. A result that is not surprising to those of us that center our lives on biblical principles. The Harvard study defines flourishing as 'a state in which all aspects in life are good.' Our focus through the series is the biblical concept of flourishing, called shalom. Shalom is found over 200 times in the Old Testament and is translated most often as peace. Biblical flourishing or Shalom encompasses wholeness in all of life, well-being, harmony, and peace. In Isaiah 9:6 in the prophesy of Jesus' birth, Jesus is called Prince of Peace, He is the Prince of Shalom.

### Prince of Shalom chart

Lead minister Mark has shared three of the four areas of flourishing that we have chosen to highlight. First we looked at COMMUNITY and how God has wired us for the need for community with others, Next, DIVINE ENCOUNTER-the need for connection with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, through personal and corporate worship. The next area we looked at was CHARACTER- we flourish when our inner world matches our outer world. Last week Mark reminded us that excellent character brings impact to our relationships and the world around us.

Today our focus is on Meaning and Purpose the 4<sup>th</sup> area of flourishing. We are going to look at two passages today, one Old Testament and one in the New Testament to help us understand God's plan for purpose. But before we get to scripture let's talk about desire.

As we consider meaning and purpose, we need to start by identifying that God created us with basic desires. To be loved, known, significant to name a few

Our day-to-day activities are motivated by our desire for significance and purpose. God created us with desire - Jesus understands that we are people of desire. Psychiatrist **Dr. Curt Thompson, in his book *the, The Soul of Desire*, says**  
**our deep desire is to be known for the purpose of creating beauty in the world.**

Created within us is a longing for what is beautiful, good, true and joyful.

When Mark asked me which aspect of flourishing, I wanted to talk about, I chose Meaning and Purpose. Most of my adult life has been centered the mission of God through service. Giving of my resources, time, and money, to promote the flourishing of others through connection with God. I grew up in this church - I love this church, I love the people of CCC. This is a church filled with believers who generously contribute both time and finances. Like many my identity was deeply tied to serving in the church. I think for my mom, because she was the daughter of the founder, serving was not optional, it was what the pastor's family did. That mentality carried over to our family; it's what we did-because we were all about the mission of the church, the Great Commission, to go into all the world to make disciples of Jesus. I think I knew the concept of the Great Commission before I could sing, 'Jesus Loves Me'. Serving was the way we contributed to the things that mattered for eternity. I watched my parents serve in leadership roles and we were always at church. Church was a place where I was welcomed, seen, loved, and valued. This is where I was taught through God's word and in the actions of others what it meant to follow Jesus. So, when Dale and I got married, it was a natural progression to get involved in a local church. Our first church after marriage was in Wheaton IL, we sang in the choir, joined a small group and I began serving in children's ministry. Eventually, we moved to Omaha and once again I served in Kids Ministry. When the church needed more staff in the Kids Ministry, it was a natural and easy progression for me to join the CCC staff. Having been deeply invested in ministry, I was excited to help equip and resource volunteers to display God's love to children, youth, and adults. In my role I was privileged to see the church flourish in mission.

Christ Community is a serving church. For many of you, some of the best hours of your week are spent leading a group or working to make our campus a place of beauty. Many serve in ministries to help people that need assistance through Benevolence and the Oil Change ministry, others serve as Stephen Ministers that come alongside hurting individuals. Hundreds serve to make Sunday happen whether on worship arts team, welcome team, kids, and youth ministry, or leading an adult class—this church-YOU-are a beautiful picture of flourishing. In fact, if you are not serving, I highly recommend finding a place to contribute. As a former discipleship leader, I understand the importance of volunteers-what happens here cannot be done without volunteers. Volunteering causes you and others to flourish and grow, I

know this to be true because I have personally experienced incredible growth through serving and I have watched it happen with many of you. But you don't have to just take my word, evidence from the Harvard study shows that performing acts of kindness for others even for short periods of time, increases flourishing. They found that choosing one day a week, to do five acts of kindness you wouldn't otherwise do and if you repeat for 6 or 10 weeks causes higher levels of happiness, less depression in addition to the good you've done to all the people you interacted with.

A survey by Quality Health Care, has shown there are mental and health benefits for people who serve others. People who serve

- Feel less stressed and experience longer feelings of calm after serving
- Have improved self-esteem
- Serving distracts from personal problems and helps to reset perspective on your circumstances
- It provides a sense of belonging and reduces isolation. Don't serve alone, invite a friend, co-worker, neighbor or relative to serve with you.
- Serving is contagious-the recipients of kindness want to pass it on.
- And bonus-serving in the church ties us to eternal outcomes!

So, as you can tell I love serving and especially serving in ministry. As believers we find value and joy in serving others both in the church and in the community. Finding meaning and purpose through volunteer work or service is great however, we need to go to Genesis and look at what God has to say about our purpose.

**Genesis 1:26, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule..."**

I want to unpack two words in this verse, image and rule, first let's talk about 'image'

The word 'image' in Hebrew is *selem* and it means idol or statue. An idol is a visible representation of an invisible being. A statue in the ancient world was put in every temple of every god for the worshiper to see what that god was like. There were idols to gods everywhere, including idols in homes to worship to keep the gods happy. The concept of image would have been easily understood by the original hearers of Genesis. But God totally changes the focus of image. The concept that **we** are God's image is counter to everything in the Ancient world and yet here it is—God put humans on earth to be his statues. His *selem*! We were put on earth to make visible the invisible God to the entire cosmos because the world is God's temple.

**We were made in God's image to show the world what He is like.**

Let's look at the next verse. **Genesis 1:27 "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them."** The phrase, image of god, was used for a king, not just any man or woman. In the ancient Near East, a king was seen as quasi-divine. His relationship to the divine was unique—he supposedly knew the divine in a way nobody else could ever hope to. John Mark Comer, in his book Garden City says, "the theology of the image of God in Genesis was, and still is, subversive and stunning. It claims that all human beings—not just those of royal blood—all of us are made in the image of God.... We were created to be kings and queens, and the entire earth is our kingdom."

**We were created as God's royal agents to reign over his kingdom, the earth.**

Are you beginning to sense the impact of image-bearing? Back to verse 26 and the word "rule"

**Genesis 1:26, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule..."**

The next thought, 'so they may rule' connects "image" and "rule" explicitly together. The word *rule* in Hebrew is translated "reign" - do you hear the king-like language? One Hebrew scholar translated it as "to actively partner with God in taking the world somewhere." God made humanity to rule—you and I were created to rule over the earth in partnership with God! We are not slaves to serve God. No, we are partners with him in causing his creation to flourish. That's our meaning, our purpose—it is why we exist!

We find one more very important point in verse 28: **God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."**

What was the blessing of God? To increase, subdue or 'tame' the earth and to rule. Making the earth flourish is God's **blessing** for humans. This is our work! Work is not a curse—it is what we were created for. That is why we desire to have significance, to seek beauty and goodness. That is why helping others, and doing activities that make life better gives us meaning and purpose. God blessed us with work—his prescribed work to shalom his kingdom.

I want to talk for a minute about why we may consider work inside the church to have greater value or to be more meaningful than the work we do the rest of the week.

In the Old and New Testament, all of life was considered spiritual. There was no divide between ministry and day to day life. It was in the Middle Ages that the idea of "calling" was used for working

inside the church and work outside the church was considered secular. This is when the unfortunate sacred/secular divide started, and we separated most of what we do in life-the 95% of our waking hours from what God blessed us to do. Society began to compartmentalize God from our secular work. This is not what was true of the Hebrews through the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. All of life was to be dedicated to bringing God's image to the world.

So let me ask you if you consider what you do day to day as work for God? Do you believe you are to bring shalom, flourishing, harmony to the community or your family? Do you believe that what you do has great value? Your work is part of the flourishing partnership to display God to the world.

So, let's redefine 'work' as not only **paid employment, but also unpaid and voluntary work, education and training, family responsibilities and caring for others.** This significant shift in defining our work helps us to understand that all we do, in every environment, we are to be the image of God and help to make where you live, work and play a place where others can flourish. Practically speaking what does this look like in our lives?

- For students, those in school or training you need to, study hard, discover your God-given skills and abilities, be kind to your friends and other students, bring your best each day
- my training and vocation was in education, as a teacher I was helping students to flourish as they learned and prepared to go to the next grade, I cared not only for the students, but their parents and my team mates and principal.
- If you are retired or in an unpaid position, there are so many ways to come alongside people that need help, or mentor someone younger than you, encourage friends when in crises.
- If you are a parent as I was, a mom of three boys, my goal was to raise godly men that would understand God's love for them so they could move into adulthood as stable healthy god honoring men.
- an endeavor for me in my marriage and family relationships is to consider how I can help my family prepare for eternity. How can I help them focus on God and the things that have eternal value. How can you help your family members prepare for an eternity of flourishing?

It does not matter if you are young or old, single or married, divorced or widowed. It does not matter if you are a plumber, landscaper, project manager, real estate agent, engineer, doctor, a builder or IT

specialist. We all desire to be known and to be a part of something that makes a difference in the lives of others. God created us with this desire. His desire for us from the beginning was for us to desire unity with him, he invites us to represent Him in making his creation flourish.

Recently, my community group leader and I were discussing work and flourishing. He noted that when he focuses on the flourishing of all the aspects of his work, it dramatically changes his perspective. Causing his work world to flourish means considering not only the bottom line of the company goals but also, he considers the good of his teammates, his customers and those in leadership over him. This shift in focus away from self to others makes him a better employee. The goal as you serve with the flourishing of everyone in mind, is that people will notice and ask why you are different, they will come to you when they are hurting. One of the members of my community group lives in such a way that she is constantly praying for customers or fellow workers. She approaches people with such gentleness and love they welcome and ask for her advice. Look for people that bring God into every environment. Watch them, ask them how it has become so natural for them to display God's goodness to the world.

Now I can hear some of you saying, Nancy, you make this sound so wonderful, but you don't understand my circumstance. My kids are rowdy and disobedient, people at my job are grouchy and unethical, my life is chaotic, there is no flourishing about it!

If we are honest, I think we have all been there at times.

Let me offer a couple of thoughts on why we don't have peace even in . My thoughts focus on what you have control over, not the areas you can't fix.

1. In terms of a paid employment-you need to set a standard of ethics that you desire and do your work based on those standards. If the job requires you to go against your ethics, you may need find a new job. Recently, Dale and I were talking with our nephew's son who is in his first real job where he sells a product. The other sales associates have encouraged him to make promises that are not true. He lets that advice roll off as he chooses (follows his code of ethics) to be honest and demonstrates that to his fellow workers. BTW he is quite successful at his work!
2. If you are not flourishing in your job-you can't stand your job it's not your passion or what you are created to do, start praying about what you really want and begin to find a way to do what you love, what you were created to do. Studies show that if we enjoy 65% of our work we can deal with the other 35%. But if those percentages are reversed, you need to find a way to do what you love.

3. It's not about you-that is about as in your face as I can. When we serve/work anywhere our first thought should always be "How can I help?" "What needs to be done?" Keep reminding yourself that it is not about you and ask the question 'what needs to be done.' I must reset my mind consistently when going into any situation to focus on others, not on my feelings or my performance.
4. Are you too tired, burned out? When I start to feel like my work is too much it is usually because my work and rest is out of balance. I need to recalibrate and determine if I am resting enough- rather overworking or taking on too much. Am I doing work that was designed for others and why am I needing to do it all-there is a whole other message in that thought. God modeled for us work and rest-are you ordering your life so that you get the rest God created you to need so you can work well?
5. Remember, Our desires are broken and we live in a broken world-sin has wrecked the shalom of God. This world is not the way it's supposed to be and it will not be the way it is supposed to be until Christ returns.

A world broken by sin has substituted false flourishing for genuine flourishing, pseudo-shalom for God's shalom. Today in postmodern culture, human flourishing is all about personal experience and satisfaction. We have lost a sense of reverence for something higher and what has remained is a concern for the self and the desire for the experience of satisfaction. People matter to us, but only to the extent of serving our personal needs.

Do you see it? We have made ourselves into gods that need to be served instead of presenting the image of God to the world. We are no different than the hundreds of generations before us that substituted the false flourishing of selfishness and sin for genuine flourishing. We, all of us, living in western culture swim in the water that assumes flourishing means individual freedom, happiness and self-expression. You cannot get away from the bombardment of messages promoting self. As followers of Jesus, we must stay in communion with God through bible reading, prayer and worship to celebrate the Lord and be grateful. We need the fellowship of other believers, community to encourage one another-keep each other on track so we don't chase after things that do not matter. We need to check our thoughts and desires against what God created us to long for, to be in communion with Him and cause others (his creation) to flourish.

Let's look at a community in the New Testament that I think exemplifies shalom despite their circumstances. 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. **Map of Thessaloniki**

The church in Thessaloniki was established by Paul with Silas in 51 AD on Paul's second missionary journey. We know that Timothy also spent time some in Thessaloniki. So we are just a couple of decades after Jesus was resurrected. Theologians believe that Paul was there teaching for about 6 months before he had to leave because of persecution towards Paul and the owner of the home where Paul was staying. Most of the believers are Gentile, it seems that not many Jews joined the new believers - so we have recent mostly Pagan converts with little Biblical training, living and working in the midst of persecution in the bustling seaport capital of Macedonia.

**1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,**

***To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.***

Note: grace and peace. I think the order is intentional as Paul always writes with intention. Grace-the gift of the act of God in Christ where our sins have been put away and then peace (shalom) wholeness and prosperity. There is no true peace without understanding the grace of God.

***2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.***

Can you sense the genuine expression of Paul's feelings, always, constant prayer, thankful for all—in this letter Paul does not need to address conflict or problems. The shalom of this community of believers brings Paul continual joy! The stress of their circumstances did not destroy their passion.

- Work produced by faith—salvation by faith alone in God motivated activity—they were so confident in their faith that they lived it out day by day.
- Labor prompted by love—'Labor' means hard toil—a hardship borne for love's sake. The kind of love that Jesus demonstrated when he went to the cross—a love that holds nothing back. When confronted with God's love we are faced with a challenge we can't ignore. Do we yield to the love of God to be transformed by it so that we see others as God sees them. A love for others that does not hold back? This is how Paul is describing this group.
- Endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Hope here is not just simple optimism, no this is hope with certainty pointing to the 2nd coming of Christ—the coming of God's Kingdom where all is as it should be—flourishing—shalom. This is one of the themes of Paul's letter.

So we have faith, love and hope



This fledgling community spread the gospel and became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia—

*4 for we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. ...6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.*

Here we see an example of a community of believers that lived out their faith by loving sacrificially and holding to the hope of Christ's return amid a culture that did not accept in any way their message. The gospel empowered by Holy Spirit forms deep conviction that is not easily ignored. The knowledge of knowing that we have been chosen to present God through our lives and share the love of Christ's sacrifice is humbling, motivating and stunningly beautiful.

I have known Jesus all my life—I don't remember a time when I did not know that Jesus is our savior. But when I was 12, I recognized my need for a personal savior - I realized I could not be rescued from my sin by my family — my standing with Jesus had to be because I surrendered my life to him, I asked him to come into my life. My overwhelming desire when I made that decision was to serve him with my life. Decades later, I recognize, what I did not have language for at that young age, I was experiencing the desire to be known by God and to display God to the world, to co-partner with him to bring shalom. It's a deep conviction that has never died. My journey has not been perfect or consistently good or beautiful by any means. But I can testify that as I stay grounded in the things we have been talking about, community, connection with God, character and contributing, it is possible to experience peace in good seasons and hard seasons. I can experience wholeness, when my relationships are strong or strained, or most amazing when confronted with unexpected loss. Dallas Willard said that when we are at the end of our rope, that is where we find God because that is where he is. When I am at a loss and my strength and abilities cannot carry me, Jesus meets me there. What I've come to realize is that is where I need to live everyday-I need to start there, confessing my need for help and aligning my desires with God so I present the image I was created to display. Personal shalom, peace, wholeness is possible now, but we know it will not be complete until Christ returns to earth, and we will reign with him forever. We have just a glimpse, a taste of what it will be like now, but it is going to be glorious. And that's good news, amen?

May God cause you to flourish, both you and your children as you go into the world this week.