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First Baptist Arlington

Flourishing Together

First Baptist Arlington

2025 - 2030

FLOURISHING - 2025, 2026, 2027 . . .

As we begin this next half-decade, I want to initially address the next three years in particular. With our foundational responsibilities in mind and with an eye on our three areas of focus, I intend to lead us in an integrated and holistic exploration of the concept of *flourishing*. We will give consideration to the research side of the conversation as we will find some level of connection to the Global Flourishing Study – the Flourishing and The Church section, in particular. Obviously, our focus will be more in the spiritual dimension as we walk through a thematic journey on Sunday mornings in our worship services. These three years will be connected Biblically, theologically, spiritually, and practically.

Over these next three years (2025-2027), we will give attention to solidifying and deepening our church’s understanding of three theologically and spiritually significant and practically connected realities that have served as the basis for our foundational commitments. These all connect easily to the concept of flourishing.

2025: Flourishing Together: *Rooted in Christ*

1 Corinthians 2:6-16 (Gospel Guide: Matthew)

Producing fruitful believers means we have to work “below the surface” in individual lives. We have to explore the “deep things of God” that give believers a spiritually healthy root system. Biblical literacy, hermeneutical training, doctrinal integrity, emotional health, and the basics of discipleship are all germane to this conversation. We will use the spiritual tools at our disposal to engage in the exploration of what lies at the root of flourishing in the domains highlighted by the Global Flourishing Study. Our hope is to build depth into the lives of our people amidst the shallow cultural currents of contemporary American life.

2026: Flourishing Together: *Transformed on The Jesus Way*

Romans 12:1-2 (Gospel Guide: Luke)

Following *The Jesus Way* is a journey of transformation. It is a total, holistic reforming of our humanity. We learn to live in community with other believers in accountable relationships, as well as engage in our own personal journey of holiness. Our behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, life goals, relationships, finances – everything about us is transformed as we become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

2027: Flourishing Together: *Impacting our World for Christ*

John 15:5-8 (Gospel Guide: John)

As we grow and mature as deeply rooted, transformed believers, God is able to use us to live influential lives for His Kingdom's sake. God has placed our people across the cultural spectrum in places of potential influence. As we work to produce fruitful believers, those believers are to bear fruit in their respective areas of influence and the Christian witness is spread beyond the walls of our church in meaningful ways. This is to the Father's glory!

FLOURISHING – 2028. . . 2029. . .

These years will include some inevitable transitions. We know that leadership succession is on the horizon. This season will be a time of strategic planning for succession and the implementation of the plan. This will be a coordinated effort between staff and lay leaders.

RESOURCES

A Theology of Health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing, Tyler J. VanderWeele, University of Notre Dame Press, 2024

Measuring Well-Being: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Social Sciences and the Humanities, edited by Matthew T. Lee, Laura D. Kubzansky, and Tyler J. VanderWeele

Understanding Flourishing: Developing a Global Community of Practice, <https://www.baylorisr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ISR-SpecialReport-TWCF-v3-2023.04.25-spread.pdf>

Flourishing & The Church, A publication of Baylor University, Harvard University, and Regent University

Social Conservatism for the Common Good: A Protestant Engagement with Robert P. George, edited by Andrew T. Walker, Crossway, 2023

Harvard Flourishing Measure Instrument, https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/files/pik/files/flourishing_measure_pdf.pdf

Into the Depths of God: Where Eyes See the Invisible, Ears Hear the Inaudible, and Minds Conceive the Inconceivable, Calvin Miller, Bethany House, 2000

Harvard University, *The Human Flourishing Program*, <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu>

Baylor Institute for the Studies of Religion, <https://www.baylorisr.org>

Happiness, Randy Alcorn, Tyndale House, 2015

Some New World: Myths of Supernatural Belief in a Secular Age, Cambridge University Press, 2024

Matthew: NIV Application Commentary, Michael J. Wilkins, Zondervan, 2004

You're Only as Smart as Your Emotions, David Brooks, *The New York Times*, August 15, 2024 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/15/opinion/emotions-feelings-intelligence.html>

A Public Missiology: How Local Churches Witness to a Complex World, Gregg Okesson, Baker Academic, 2020

Flourishing Together: A Christian Vision for Students, Educators, & Schools, Lynn E. Swaner and Andy Wolfe, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021

Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy,
<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

2025: Flourishing Together: *Rooted in Christ* **1 Corinthians 2:6-16 (Gospel Guide: Matthew)**

WINTER 2025: *Happiness Is . . .*

The Beatitudes

January 5 - March 4, 2025

Introduction to Flourishing Together: *Rooted in Christ*

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

In 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, Paul addresses the necessity for and the possibility of spiritual maturity for God's people in Christ. He boldly shares that God's wisdom is available for His people. In fact, He declares that God's wisdom (necessary for spiritual maturity) is available for us who are now in Christ--and God has always desired us to have it so that we might share in His glory! However, the availability of God's wisdom had been hidden until the Incarnation of Christ. Paul declares the mystery of God's wisdom has now been revealed in Christ.

Further, the path to spiritual maturity is made available only to those who will truly avail themselves to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Paul reaches back to the prophet Isaiah to help us understand that God has so much more planned for His people than we could ever imagine on our own. The opportunity for spiritual wisdom, insight, and maturity is amazing and possible! God desires for us to grow beyond our imagining.

As followers of Jesus, this journey into maturity – being truly rooted in Christ, is guided by God’s Spirit. Paul declares in this text that the Spirit of God searches (knows) the deep things of God. Then Paul shares that only those who are indwelt by the Spirit of God can discern the guidance of God’s Spirit on this path to maturity and Godly wisdom.

In fact, Paul closes this section by revealing to us that we have the mind of Christ available to us. All this to say, God is inviting us to join Him on a journey into the depths! We do not have to live our lives on the surface. We can plumb the depths of spiritual truth and be connected to God on a deeper level than we could ever imagine! We can even come to the place where we share the perspective of Jesus in our daily lives!

This is what it means to be “rooted in Christ.” My desire for us in this first year of our study of human flourishing is for our people to grow deeper into their faith. I am praying that the roots of the spiritual lives of our people will plumb deeper than ever before. I want our people to be deep people.

My friend, Calvin Miller used an illustration to help us understand this a bit better. He used to describe the differences between a snorkeler and a scuba diver. Think about it. Anybody can snorkel! And – it is a fun activity. And – you can see some amazing things if you are in the right body of water. But scuba diving is a different thing altogether. Scuba divers are trained, disciplined, and much more adventurous. And – it pays off! Scuba divers see things that a snorkeler will never see!

So, Calvin used to say that our churches are filled with snorkelers talking with other snorkelers and thinking they are experiencing the same reality as scuba divers! But scuba divers know the difference!!

So, with that said ----- here we go! Into the deep!

WINTER 2025: Happiness Is . . .

One of the Domains highlighted by the Global Flourishing Study is “Happiness and Life Satisfaction.” As a theologian, this leads me to questions like, “What does the Bible teach us about happiness? Is there a difference between happiness and joy? What about

gladness, to be cheerful, to be merry, to be delighted? How might they all be connected?"

In an attempt to launch our study of flourishing in a Biblical context, we will begin the year with a study of the Biblical teachings about the meaning of happiness, joy, gladness, etc. We will explore the connection between the Biblical perspective of God's creation of human beings in His image and the possibility of living a life as He intended. This will give us the opportunity to introduce the whole concept of *flourishing*.

For some Christians, happiness is not a worthy desire. Some like to draw a firm line delineating the differences between happiness and joy. Randy Alcorn disagrees. In his book, *Happiness*, he quotes theologians from Augustine to George Whitefield regarding the human desire for happiness. Then he offers the following summary:

Seeking happiness is a given – a universal constant. It's present in every person of every age, era, and circumstance. So it's entirely unrealistic and counterproductive for Christians to tell people they shouldn't want to be happy. They can't help it! Any pastor who tries to motivate people to stop seeking happiness, any parent who tries to make his or her child repent of being motivated by happiness, is fighting a losing battle. Neither will succeed, and both will do damage by distancing the gospel from the happiness everyone craves.

-Randy Alcorn, *Happiness*, p. 6

We should not be surprised that God's intended life for humanity includes the experiences of joy/gladness/cheer/happiness. God filled His creation with goodness. The first chapter of Genesis chronicles the goodness of God's creative genius. The creation of humanity is the climax of the creation narrative. God provided for the goodness to be experienced by human beings. Obviously, the reality of goodness for human beings is rooted in acknowledging and nurturing our relationship with our Creator.

St. Augustine famously wrote, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee." Tyler VanderWeele references this quote in his book, *A Theology of Health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing* (University of Notre Dame, 2024). VanderWeele points to the creation narratives as indicators for God's desire and intent for human beings: "The creation narratives the Scriptures begin with are an important source for discerning God's intent for the human person. There it seems that

God's intent for each person and for all creation is that all aspects of being should be good." (VanderWeele, *A Theology of Health*, p. 11)

We will focus on God's design and intent for humanity in the midst of God's expansive genius revealed through creation. In fact, we will use the most famous sermon ever preached (The Sermon on the Mount) to learn about God's design in *re-creation*. God's great plan of redemption reaches a climactic point in the Incarnation. Jesus established the Kingdom of God on this earth. His message recorded in Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6, reveals the essence of life in this Kingdom. Just as God has woven goodness throughout creation, He makes it possible for us to experience His goodness and joy in the new creation (*re-creation*) we have discovered in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

One of the more famous sections of this sermon has been called "The Beatitudes." These well-known teachings of Jesus are found in Matthew 5:3-12 (also in Luke 6:20-23). As most everyone knows, each beatitude begins with the word, *blessed*. Underneath that familiar English translation is the Greek word, *makarios*. Again, Randy Alcorn provides an extensive argument to substantiate his view that "happy" is a legitimate, and perhaps the most accurate translation of *makarios*. He offers that maybe if we chose to utilize "truly happy" or "happy in God's favor" – there might be more affinity for this translation. (Alcorn, *Happiness*, pp.217-219)

As an aside, translators have a challenging task when seeking to capture the essence of the meaning of the original language when translating to another language. Often there are no "real" equivalents available. Consequently, they rely on what are known as "semantic domains" in the science of translation. Every language has these domains. For example, in English there are numerous words within the semantic domain *bright*: sunny, luminous, light, clear, and unclouded. This phenomenon is found in both Hebrew (the Old Testament language) and Greek (the New Testament language).

So, let's apply the reality of semantic domains to our discussion of *happiness*. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament have domains that contextualize our understanding of the Biblical meaning of *happiness*. There are numerous words in both testaments that are translated with the English word happiness in various translations of the Bible. When these words occur in the text, translators are faced with a decision. How are these various words to be translated into English? There are numerous options and translators have used them all, depending on context. For example, the following words are used by translators when the context seems appropriate: *joy, merriment, pleasure, cheer, laughter, delight, jubilation, celebration*, etc.

So, back to the Beatitudes. How should we translate the Greek word *makarios* into English? Scholars disagree. Alcorn argues that happy is a legitimate translation. However, Michael Wilkins, Distinguished Professor of New Testament Language and Literature and Dean of the Faculty at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University disagrees. Here is Wilkinson's assessment:

Some recent versions translate *makarios* as "happy" or "fortunate," which can be good renderings, but the modern usage of those terms tends to trivialize the meaning by simply suggesting a temporary or circumstantial state. The somewhat ambiguous English "blessed" perhaps is still the best term to describe Jesus' statements.

-Michale J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, p. 204

Notice that Wilkins raises his objection while stating objectively that "happy" is a legitimate translation of the Greek. He also points out that the English word "blessed" is somewhat ambiguous in its meaning. While I have always been partial to the word *blessed* as the best translation of *makarios*, I have come to appreciate the potential of using *happy* as an alternative. The idea is that *blessed* focuses our attention on God and His unique ability to provide for us ---- while the word *happiness* tends to represent the state of being of the person who has been blessed.

So, as we begin a study of the Beatitudes, when appropriate and Biblically justifiable, I will be using the words *blessed* and *happy* interchangeably. I think the textual evidence is sufficient for this shift in my thinking. I will do my best to help our congregation understand the spiritual depth associated with the Biblical presentation of *happiness*.

Why all this fuss about the word *happiness*? Well, one of the domains in the Global Flourishing Study is Happiness and Life Satisfaction. If we are going to address this domain, I want us to do so from both a Biblically sound and theologically accurate perspective. I plan to do exactly that!

So - here we go!

WINTER 2025
Happiness Is . . .
The Beatitudes
January 5 – March 4, 2025

January 5, 2025: *Flourishing Together: Rooted in Christ*
1 Corinthians 2:6-16

This text serves as the core passage for this year-long study of what it means to be *Rooted in Christ*. In this passage, Paul declares that the Holy Spirit searches the deep things of God. It is only through a dynamic relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit that we can attain the spiritual depth needed to flourish as Christians. The good news is that God has made it possible! We can engage with God in this personal relationship, and He will reveal the mystery of His wisdom to us!

Flourishing Together Weekly Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

January 12, 2025: **Rev. Oza Jones, BGCT Director of Evangelism**
Guest Preacher

Flourishing Together Weekly Reading: Psalm 1

January 19, 2025: *Don't Worry, Be Happy!*
Psalm 68:3-6

Modern theologians often distinguish between happiness and joy. Joy is normally understood to be the abiding reality available to Christians regardless of circumstances. Happiness is often portrayed as more dependent on circumstances and refers to an emotional state. However, the textual evidence in the Scripture seems to indicate there is a great deal of overlap in how the writers of the Bible portray happiness and joy. In other words, these two English terms are viable translations of a number of both Hebrew (OT) and Greek (NT) words. They are in the same semantic domain and have some synonymous connections. I will introduce the concept of connecting these two terms in this sermon as I draw from a number of texts in both the Old and New Testaments.

Flourishing Together Weekly Reading: Philippians 4:4-9

Flourishing Together: Launch Weekend --- January 24-26, 2025

In October 2021, Baylor University and Harvard University announced the launching of the Global Flourishing Study. The research team is comprised of some 45 scholars/researchers who are guiding the longitudinal studies of over 200,000 people across 22 countries. This work is to take place initially over the next 5 years. It is the most comprehensive undertaking of its time in social science history.

Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion and the Human Flourishing Program of Harvard University have now joined with the Abundant Life Flourishing Program of Regent University to study and promote flourishing in the church in the 21st century. This is a wonderfully new outgrowth of the Global Flourishing Study.

The work of this group will focus on three levels: Individual Christians, Congregations, and Communities Surrounding Congregations. They intend to research the factors that lead to the facilitation of flourishing Christians. Collectively, these Christians living in community with each other will result (or already has resulted) in flourishing congregations. Then, these flourishing congregations will have an impact on the surrounding, greater community and contribute to its overall flourishing.

On this pivotal weekend, we will begin a three-year journey as a church with a church-wide retreat. We will focus on the introduction of the concept of human flourishing to our congregation. We will provide an overview of the Six Domains currently being utilized by the Global Flourishing Study.

Scott Heare, Chief Vision Officer of the Global Flourishing Project - Austin/San Antonio Region will be our guest for the Friday and Saturday sessions as he will introduce us to the Global Flourishing & Church initiative.

Retreat Schedule:

Friday - January 24

5:30pm - Meal (Optional) - Fellowship Hall

6:30pm - Kick-Off Session - Sanctuary - *Children in childcare**

8:00pm - Dismiss - End of Day 1

Saturday - January 25

9:00am - Grab-and-go Breakfast & Coffee - Campus

9:30am - Session 2 - Sanctuary - *Children to childcare**

10:30-10:45am - Break

10:45 - 11:15am - Bible Study Small Groups
11:30am - Session 3, Worship & Prayer - Sanctuary
12:00pm - End of Day 2
12:15pm - *Volunteer Lunch for those who are serving during the retreat.*

Sunday - January 26

Normal Sunday Morning Schedule
8:30am - Classic Worship
9:45am - Bible Study - Check back for more information
11:00am - Contemporary Worship

January 26, 2025: *Flourishing in Purity* **Matthew 5:8**

One of the Six Domains in the Global Flourishing Study is Happiness and Life Satisfaction. Sociologists have long identified the desire for happiness and life satisfaction as universal among human beings. We will continue our exploration we began last Sunday on the topic of happiness as we launch a study of the Beatitudes. We will begin with the fundamental declaration from Jesus - "Happy are the pure in heart!"

Flourishing Together Weekly Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

February 2, 2025: *Flourishing in Poverty* **Matthew 5:3-5**

In today's message, we will connect the first three Beatitudes—poverty in spirit, mourning, and meekness. All of these have something to do with the acknowledgment of God's resources in the midst of inadequacy, loss, or the bridling of our aggressive tendencies. These three pronouncements from Jesus remind us of our dependence on His presence and power to enable us to flourish in the real-life challenges of the human experience.

Flourishing Together Weekly Reading: Luke 6:17-26

February 9, 2025: *Flourishing in Pursuit*
Matthew 5:6

Jesus continues to describe a flourishing Kingdom citizen with His declaration that we demonstrate (or discover) happiness through pursuing His Kingdom's interests. As followers of Jesus, we have to deal with our selfish desires that lead to selfish pursuits aimed at selfish ends. Overcoming those temptations towards self-centeredness is necessary if we are going to discover true happiness. The pursuit of righteousness is a life-long journey and it promises a greater reward than we could ever imagine!

Flourishing Together Weekly Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

February 16, 2025: *Flourishing in Pity*
Matthew 5:7

The English word "merciful" translates the adjectival form of *eleos* in Greek. According to the *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, *eleos* is "the outward manifestation of pity." While there is a distinction between "mercy" and "pity" --- there are textual connections throughout the Bible in both Hebrew and Greek. Today we will explore how God can work through our compassion towards us to extend mercy. This outward expression of love and concern for others is characteristic of a happy and blessed person in God's Kingdom.

Flourishing Together Weekly Reading: Matthew 18:21-35

February 23, 2025: *Flourishing in Peacemaking*
Matthew 5:9

We live in a society marked by rancor, polarization, and separation. Ours is a loud culture! We find evidence of the relational brokenness on every level imaginable. Families, neighborhoods, school boards, houses of legislature, Christian denominations, and so many others are places of division, anger, and accusatory language. We need people of peace who can help broker peace in these spaces across our society. This text challenges us to evaluate how God might use us to be voices of reconciliation in the face of so much division in our world. Jesus says this much-needed expression of Kingdom life is characteristic of God's children!

Flourishing Together Weekly Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

March 2, 2025:

Flourishing in Persecution

Matthew 5:10-12

Unfortunately, our world has not always favorably received God's people or God's message. This remains true today. Obviously, many of the original disciples of Jesus faced serious persecution from both Romans and Jews. In fact, for over 250 years after the time of Christ, believers were often persecuted for their faith. Today there are places where serious persecution is a reality for Christians. For those of us in the West, the opposition we face may not rise to the level faced by those in the broader Christian family, we still often deal with the opposing forces of evil. Jesus promises us that our Father is paying attention and His care for us reaches into eternity.

Flourishing Together Weekly Reading: James 1:1-18