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# Flourishing Together

## First Baptist Arlington

### 2025 – 2030

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

**SPRING 2025: *Walk This Way!***  
April 27 – May 31, 2025

*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*  
**Jesus (Matthew 5:48)**

According to the research team engaged in the historic *Global Flourishing Study*, one of the key domains to be measured regarding human flourishing is **Character and Virtue**. I'm grateful the researchers have acknowledged the connection between a person's inner character development and its outward manifestation through behavior to well-being. Virtue (outward manifestation) is an expression of character. Both of these realities need to be considered in any true examination of human flourishing.

Tyler VanderWeele, the Director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University is convinced that character analysis is essential to researching the complexities of human flourishing:

. . . we believe that one of the strengths of the flourishing literature has been its attention to [the importance of character](#) in a flourishing life, following the lead of millennia of philosophical and religious wisdom from many traditions. Character and virtue are central to our own [flourishing assessment](#), and we would go so far as to [argue](#) that even goods such as happiness or a sense of purpose in life only contribute to your flourishing if you are virtuous. For instance, it is arguably *worse* for a murderer or mad tyrant to feel very happy or

deeply purposeful amid his crimes than if he felt properly ashamed of himself or adrift in life.

-Brendan Case & Tyler J. VanderWeele, "What Does Character Have to Do with Human Flourishing?" *Common Good*, February 19, 2024

<https://commongoodmag.com/what-does-human-character-have-to-do-with-human-flourishing/>

Presumably, as a result of VanderWeele's research in particular, and many other scholars in general, the domain of Character and Virtue is included in the massive Global Flourishing Study. The *Flourishing Measure* includes two questions that ask all participants to answer in the self-evaluation process. These questions serve to establish a baseline for the more in-depth set of questions that address this domain in the study itself.

As a Christian, the inclusion of an analysis of character and virtue in determining the status of individual flourishing just makes sense. It is theologically sound to include this particular category. The transformation of the character of an individual and the resulting expression of Christian virtues in everyday life are both connected to our belief in spiritual formation and discipleship.

## FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

The New Testament has much to offer regarding the development of Christian character and the ensuing expression of Christian virtues. With the first century as the context for the crafting of the New Testament, we must take into consideration the complex theological, cultural, philosophical, and political milieu in which it arose. This consideration is important since this is the period in which the single most significant human being lived (Jesus) and the one institution He established (the church) was birthed and received Apostolic instruction.

What was happening in the first century that facilitates a better understanding of the Christian perspective on character and virtue? This is not the place for an exhaustive answer to that question, however, I would like to offer a succinct, cursory response that will help us in our study this Spring.

Principally, for the sake of our conversation and exploration, there are just a few considerations I would offer regarding the first century milieu that serves as the

backdrop to both the earthly ministry of Jesus and the composition of the New Testament. Further, we also have to give some consideration to our own cultural, theological, philosophical, and political context as we study together.

Regarding the first century, let me just provide a brief overview of three essential contextual considerations in seeking to understand the New Testament's treatment of character and virtuous living:

- 1. Eschatological Considerations:** The New Testament is a compilation of the life and teachings of Jesus (the Gospels), the proclamation of Jesus through the church (Acts), and the explanation of Christian theology (Epistles). All of this material is contextualized by an overarching eschatological perspective. The consistent witness of the New Testament continues the eschatological perspective of Old Testament theology. In other words, history is meaningful and purposeful. History has a beginning in God and an end in His mind. Jonathan Pennington offers a helpful explanation of this truth in his book, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*:

Specifically, Jesus and the authors of the New Testament see themselves as part of the grand story of God's creation and redeeming work in the world, a world that had a beginning and will have an end, or at least a renewed beginning. The foundational orientation to this story occurs in Genesis 1-11, where we learn that God, who is the sole creator of all that is, has set his especial love upon humanity as the apex of his creation. The tension of the story is that humanity fails in both its love for him and love for one another, resulting in a darkening of mind and heart and ultimately death, rather than flourishing life. God then sets in motion the mysterious, arduous, and long-term plan for the reversal of this state beginning with Abraham and flowing through his descendants.

-Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, p. 25

In fact, I would press this truth a bit further. Jesus Christ established the Kingdom of God on earth. At the center of His teachings in the Gospel accounts are truths about the Kingdom of God. Another way to say this is that the life, teachings, example, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus has inaugurated the "Age to Come" as a present reality. In simple terms, Biblical theology divides time into two distinct Ages: This Present Evil Age and The Age to Come (Galatians 1:4; Matthew 12:32).

Obviously, the Kingdom of God has been established but has not yet been consummated. So, we live in the “now and the not yet.” Sometimes this view is referred to as *Inaugurated Eschatology*. The Age to Come has been initiated and it overlaps with, intersects with, The Present Evil Age. As Christians, we have been uniquely designed for both ages. But the principal conviction for Christians is that God has designed us *ultimately* to live in the Age to Come. His transforming work within us through the power of His Holy Spirit is preparing us for our eternal existence in His new Kingdom. Consequently, the development of character and ensuing virtuous living are actually connected to this eschatological reality. God is at work in us to restore us to becoming fully human!

N. T. Wright offers the following helpful explanation of this truth in this excerpt from his book, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*:

Paul sees that in Jesus Christ the long-awaited age to come has already begun. And that is where Christians must consciously choose to live . . . Yes, the present age continues on its weary way as well, so that the two overlap. Like waves on the ocean shore, God’s new age has come thundering in through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but the present age acts as a powerful undertow, preventing the incoming waves from having their full force. The undertow of the continuing present age does its best to persuade those who through faith and baptism are already part of the age to come that in fact nothing much has changed, and they should simply continue as they were, living the same life that everyone else is living. “The way the world is” is a powerful, insidious force, and it takes all the energy of new creation, not least of faith and hope, to remind oneself that the age to come really is already here, with all its new possibilities and prospects.

-N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, p. 152

2. **Second-Temple Jewish Wisdom Literature:** The Wisdom literature of both First Temple and Second Temple reflects the perspective I have shared in the first point. In other words, God’s revelation to His people was given to guide them to live in the light of His redeeming purpose. We find in the Psalms, Proverbs, ethical teachings of the prophets, and the admonitions from Apocalyptic (“apocalypse” means “revelation”) of Judaism a consistent perspective that true wisdom is found only in a relationship with the only true God. Consequently,

the fear of the Lord, the knowledge of the Lord, the justice of the Lord --- all of these are connected to true wisdom.

Further, this wisdom is connected to an eschatological hope that God will restore the “shalom” of His creation. Working for justice, searching for meaning, engaging in ethical behavior-----all of these are expressions of true wisdom that is found only in the life that is connected to Yahweh (the only true God). And the wisdom literature of Judaism is not a set of philosophical reflections and ideological dictums. Rather, the wisdom is connected to real life, relationships within families, ethical business dealings, moral behaviors, and such. True wisdom leads to peace and fulfillment in the everyday of life for real people who are engaged in real life.

3. **Greek/Roman Philosophy and Ethics:** One other consideration that I will briefly summarize is the philosophical context of the Greco-Roman world of the first century. More specifically, the Greek philosophical reflections on character and virtue were influential forces in the intellectual atmosphere of first-century Israel. Germane to our conversation, the Middle East in the first century had been influenced by the attempt of Greek philosophers to understand human happiness.

From a Christian perspective, the Greek philosophical approach to ethics was too narrow and too singularly externally focused. To be fair, the key question for Greek philosophy was, “What makes people happy?” Aristotle represents this tradition well. He was interested in human flourishing or happiness. He used the Greek term, *eudaimonia* to refer to human flourishing. This was the *telos* (Greek for “goal” or “end”) for all human beings.

For Aristotle, the practicing of the cardinal virtues (courage, justice, prudence, and temperance) would gradually lead to the state of *eudaimonia* -- flourishing. However, Aristotle does not actually account for human sinfulness, and thus, he does not factor in the role of redemption and inner transformation in his writings. With that said, there is much evidence that his teachings had permeated the intellectual spaces of first-century Judaism.

### CHRISTIAN VIEW OF CHARACTER AND VIRTUE

Now that we have set the New Testament in its context, what do we learn about character and virtue from a holistic study of the New Testament? Obviously, I’m not

providing an exhaustive answer to this question. However, I can offer a succinct summary. So ---- first, we discover that the Christian understanding of character development and virtuous living is more comprehensive and holistic than what was taught by Greek philosophers. Once more, let's turn to N. T. Wright for a helpful explanation:

What the New Testament writers are urging, following Jesus himself, is therefore quite like Aristotle's argument in some ways, but in a significantly different mode. The comparison is somewhat like that between a three-dimensional model sitting beside a two-dimensional one — a cube beside a square, say, or a sphere beside a circle: Jesus and his followers are offering the three-dimensional model toward which Aristotle's two-dimensional model one points. When you get the sphere, you get the circle thrown in, as it were, but it now means something rather different.

-N. T. Wright, *After You Believe*, p. 35

In the New Testament, character development is directly linked to the process of spiritual formation that occurs in the life of a committed follower of Jesus who is living in community with fellow believers in the journey of what we know as the Christian life. Here is how I would describe the process of character development for a Christian:

**Jesus Christ desires to absolutely, completely, and holistically redeem every part of you, transform you by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within you and through His redeemed community, to conform you to His image.**

Once a person is born again, God's Spirit begins a work within them that He will carry on until completion! But the individual believer cooperates with the Spirit in this process. There is an inner transformation that occurs over time where the believer is being shaped and formed into the image of Christ Himself.

As the character of a believer is being formed, it has a healing effect on the individual. God's restorative work brings about holistic change, and the ensuing result is a person who is flourishing! Tyler VanderWeele makes this point in his newest work, *A Theology of Health*:

Healing can come about through growth in character. Good character is itself constitutive of the wholeness of the person . . . A growth in character helps orient the whole of our lives to what is most meaningful and gives us purpose as we better pursue the good of ourselves and of others and as we pursue God . . . Growth in character can be facilitated by our own efforts, by the formation of

good habits and continually seeking what is good. However, growth in character is perhaps more profoundly facilitated by the work of the Spirit, by the life of the Church and participation in community, the receiving of the sacraments, and the experience of forgiveness and love. These things enable us to experience what is good and to better to pursue it.

-Tyler VanderWeele, *A Theology of Health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing*, pp. 245-246

So, character formation, from a Christian perspective, is a holistic work of the Spirit of God within the inner life of a redeemed follower of Jesus who is engaged in purposeful and missional living in the Kingdom of God.

Virtuous living is both an outgrowth of and a contributor to character development. On the one hand, engaging in virtuous living, as a Christian, contributes to the development of inner character. On the other hand, the inner transformation of the believer leads to virtuous living. It is a both-and.

In the New Testament, we are confronted with a clarion call to live a virtuous life. The expression of Christian virtues like – faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude – form the foundation of virtuous living. There are many virtues that emerge from these core expressions.

As Spirit-filled Christians who are experiencing the inner transforming work of God in our lives, we are called to live ethical lives that reflect and reinforce that transformative work. For example, we are to bear each other's burdens, forgive offenses, refuse to gossip, tell the truth in love, reject discriminatory behavior, pursue righteousness, love our neighbors as ourselves, share our resources, pray for each other, practice honesty in our business dealings, and clothe ourselves with humility, kindness, gentleness, and compassion – to name a few!

As we engage in the journey of character development and virtuous living, we are giving expression to our belief that we are already living in *The Age to Come*! Certainly remain in *This Present Evil Age*, but the eschatological reality is that we are already citizens of the Kingdom of God. We are seeking to experience God's will on earth just as it is in Heaven. Our destiny is certain. By faith, we live our lives in the light of the resurrection of Jesus and our future resurrection! While we await His return, we are being uniquely outfitted to live fully into our future reality in the New Heaven and the New Earth.

God is at work within us to make us complete in Him (Matthew 5:48). Praise God!

## **SPRING 2025: *Walk This Way!***

**April 27 – May 31, 2025**

**April 27, 2025:**                    *New Age Wisdom*

**1 Corinthians 2:6-16**

This sermon launches the entire series. This text is serving as a foundational passage for our entire year together. We will focus on the acknowledgment of Paul that the Gospel is not an expression of the wisdom “of this age.” God is at work in us to reveal a deeper wisdom, a deeper reality, a deeper expression of truth ---- that can only be revealed by Him. In fact, it is a mystery. In other words, only by revelation will we understand all we need to know about following Jesus. And – God has more planned for us in The Age to Come (that has already begun) than we could ever imagine! He is already at work within us to fit us for life in His Kingdom.

**Weekly Reading: Colossians 1:1-23**

**May 4, 2025:**                    *Put Your Mind To It!*

**College Grad Sunday      Romans 12:1-2**

Today we will honor our college graduates in both worship services. We will bless these students and congratulate them on this accomplishment. The sermon will be an examination of a foundational passage with respect to character and virtue. Paul declares that our minds must be renewed if we are going to develop an inner Christian character and if we are going to live virtuous lives. We cannot rely on our natural pathways of thinking. Our reasoning has to be redeemed and engaged if we are going to reflect God’s glory in our world.

**Weekly Reading: Colossians 1:24-2:15**

**May 11, 2025:**                    *Love is the Greatest!*

**Mother’s Day                    Colossians 3:1-17**

Today will be a special day in the life of our church. We will honor our Mothers! We will have parents who will dedicate themselves and their babies to the Lord. It will be a sweet time for our church family. In this sermon, we will launch a 3-week examination of Colossians 3:1-17. This passage is one of the most complete calls to virtuous living in the entire New Testament. We will take the time today to explore Paul’s challenge to Christians to give attention to *love*. At the center of all Christian virtues is love. The Bible has so much to say about love! Love is the foundational virtue for Christians.

**Weekly Reading: Colossians 2:16-23**



**May 18, 2025:**

***Designer Fashions***

**High School Grad Sunday**

**Colossians 3:1-17**

Today we will honor our High School Graduates! This is a truly special time for us. This is a rite of passage in our culture. Our church has long celebrated when our students graduate from High School. In the sermon today, we will explore Paul's challenge to "put to death" all the disastrous and damaging behaviors listed in this text. We will seek to understand how to "clothe ourselves" with the virtues listed in this text. We will discover these "clothes" have been fashioned by our Designer to outfit us for life in His Kingdom.

**Weekly Reading: Colossians 3:1-17**

**May 25, 2025:**

***Walk This Way . . . Together!***

**Colossians 3:1-17**

Life in the Kingdom of God is meant to be lived in community. The virtues listed in Colossians 3 are relational in nature. In other words, the practicing of virtuous living takes place in the context of community. We are to treat each other according to the ethic set forth by the New Testament. Virtuous living emerges from a redeemed Christian character. Our character is also shaped by our decision to live fully into a virtuous life. When we do so, we live in such a way that is beneficial to others. This is a blessed life. This is actually what is known as . . . *flourishing!*

**Weekly Reading: Colossians 3:18-4:18**

## **RESOURCES**

**Brendan Case & Tyler J. VanderWeele, "What Does Character Have to Do with Human Flourishing?" *Common Good*, February 19, 2024**

<https://commongoodmag.com/what-does-human-character-have-to-do-with-human-flourishing/>

**Tyler VanderWeele, *A Theology of Health: Wholeness and Human Flourishing*, 2024**

**Tyler VanderWeele, "The Importance, Opportunities, and Challenges of Empirically Assessing Character for the Promotion of Flourishing," *Journal of Education*, June 2021**

<https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/KSEUQHEN5C9USD3VF9IB/full>

**Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Theological Commentary*, 2017**

**N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, 2010**

**Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, 2019**

**Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality*, 2022**

**Peter Harrison, *Some New World: Myths of Supernatural Belief in a Secular Age*, 2024**