

Flourishing and the Beatitudes: The Nexus of Blessed Life

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Abstract

This paper harmonises human flourishing and the beatitudes referred to by Christ in the famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-23). Flourishing is historically examined from philosophical, psychological and evangelical perspectives. In all three perspectives, flourishing is defined and elaborated. Philosophically, flourishing is not a subjective feeling or a mental state but an objective state of affairs of an individual as a member of the species. It is a pattern of living that synchronises to one's totality of living over a longer period. From psychological perspective, flourishing is feeling good or satisfaction that leads to functioning well. A flourishing person embraces engagement, being self-determined, being hopeful, resilience, harmonious relationships, and social connections. This person is a self-starter and will always take initiative because the environment enables him or her to function well and satisfactorily. From the evangelical perspective, flourishing is shalom, which is peace, harmony, and prosperity. It is a well-lived life in motion. It is life lived in right relationship with God, with one's environment, with neighbours, and with self. Flourishing people are blessed people. They experience the inner qualities of divine joy and perfect happiness. They have some divine favour bestowed upon them, therefore, possess a certain character quality or experience peculiar to those belonging to the community of faith. A conclusion is drawn that true flourishing is not for the opulent members of human race, but for the poor and oppressed who are rich only in pity, purity, peace, persecution, and remain perseverant, holding on to the hope of salvation. Flourishing puts believers above negative circumstances. A flourishing person is a person in Christ, which is where blessedness lies.

1. Introduction

Flourishing has become one theological discourse for some time. It became particularly popular when in 2015, Miroslav Volf released a widely read monograph, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*. This paper focuses on human flourishing from philosophical, psychological, and theological points of view. Human flourishing and beatitudes referred to in Matthew 5:3-11 and Luke 6:20-23 are examined. The relationship between the two is the underlying theme of this paper.

The broader definition of human flourishing is informed by various academic disciplines, therefore a hybrid concept. This means that ‘it is naturalistic, culture-dependent and agent-relative.’ (De Ruyter, Oades & Waghid 2020:2). Objectively a person can develop positive faith and flourish, while subjectively one can align with personal views, desires, or preferences towards one’s potential development. One’s identity and one’s capability gives meaning to life. It will be ideal for one to look at flourishing’s genesis through the ages.

2. Aristotelian roots (Philosophical)

Generally speaking, human flourishing speaks of doing or being well regarding life satisfaction, mental and physical health, purposeful living, character and virtue, and social relationships (Tyler & Van der Weelea 2017). Human flourishing has always been a discourse throughout history. It is found in philosophy, education, and natural sciences in general. The root meaning of flourishing comes from the Greek word *eudaimonia*, commonly meaning happiness or well-being. The *eudaimonia* envisioned by Greek philosophers and some modern philosophers is based on social discrimination, a mismatch against biblical understanding. Aristotle conceived a *polis* characterised by the happiness of life. This concept is promoted by some philosophers in applied ethics to address human concerns and issues of social justice. Those who subscribe to *eudaimonia* speak of happiness at the exclusion of persons based on their race, sex, social status, nationality, and so on. This *eudaimonia* promotes continued misery and oppression as a natural order and breaking from it would deprive society of its intended happiness. A good example is apartheid ideology which promoted the happiness of the volk at the expense of the indigenes. Endeavours to break from it was perceived as the disturbance of ordered happiness of the *volk*. Implicit in this form of *eudaimonia* is ‘visions of human flourishing—that are antithetical to the biblical vision of shalom’ (Smith 2019:17).

The great philosopher, Aristotle analysed human flourishing and concluded that it is not a subjective feeling or a mental state but an objective state of affairs of an individual as a member of the species (Broadie & Rowe 2002). Closer scrutiny of this analysis leads one to perceive flourishing as a pattern of living that synchronises to one’s totality of living over a longer period. It is a continuous action, therefore never static or able to reach a plateau. It encapsulates activities that affirm and confirm one’s

potentialities. Human flourishing is therefore not a visible physical opulence, “but also of intentionality, experience, and culture.” (Kleining & Evans 2013:542). It is exerted and observed in all areas of life, as asserted by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (2020:385) that ‘Human flourishing thus encompasses physical, social, emotional, mental and cognitive dimensions of human life.’ The Aristotelian teleological conception of human flourishing has for centuries offered philosophical anthropology in which metaphysics, psychology, theology, and ethics were intertwined. Human flourishing is, therefore, the final good sought after by humanity to be functionally satisfying in all areas of life.

3. Psychological Perspectives

The modern positive psychologists agree that both hedonic and *eudaimonic* approaches contribute toward understanding of human flourishing psychologically, emotionally, and socially (Henderson & Knight 2012:196). From this perspective, human flourishing emanates from positive institutions, especially if those institutions claim some form of spiritual origin or formation. It is when flourishing becomes the appraisals by humans regarding the quality of their lives as expressed in terms of multidimensional indicators, as attested by scholars such as Keyes & Annas (2009:199), including the likes of Rothmann (2013:125). These psychologists emphasise feeling good (satisfaction) that leads to functioning well (participative). Functioning well embraces engagement, being self-determined, being hopeful, resilience, harmonious relationships, and social connections. The flourishing person visualized here is a self-starter and will always take initiative because the environment (institution, which is a church in this context) enables him or her to function well and satisfactorily. The message of hope or promises of alternate lifestyle achievement articulates a person towards optimism and sense of purpose. Any counter-productive results are shifted to evil intentions to thwart a good plan.

4. Evangelical Perspectives

There are myriads of questions regarding joy, peace and happiness, especially in the world full of corruption, crime, imbalances between the haves and the have-nots. Injustices are growing and seen on every ground of public domain. The rich are becoming richer at the expense of the poor. Those with fingers on a till enrich themselves with bank notes in the drawers (state treasury), and the ‘brown envelope syndrome’ (bribery) engulfs politicians of all ranks. McGrath (2022:80) asks question to the

situation: ‘But what happens if our experience of the world seems chaotic, dark and resistant to interpretation?’ This is also highlighted by Moltmann (2015:1) that ‘The modern world takes its bearings from humanistic and naturalistic concepts of life, and in so doing, what it experiences is a diminished life.’ Ours is the dark world where there are many fundamental questions of life, yet finding answers being like trying to purchase a farm in the Central Business District of the city. Evangelicals are expected to perform well in a high demanding environment of work, home, church, and society at large. The picture of the pumpkin growing and flourishing on the rubbish dump seems impossible for evangelical flourishing in the midst of demanding and decadent cultures. Lusko (2020:17) brings the words of comfort:

Pain can paralyze our vision and shame can stunt our growth. But there’s actually something beautiful hidden beneath the dirt. There is a courage concealed, a strength simmering, and a wisdom waiting to be seen.

This therapeutic declaration is also captured by McGrath (2022:83) that ‘God dwells in darkness, but is really present to us and for us, despite our inability to penetrate that darkness.’ Flourishing from evangelical perspective is intertwined with shalom, which is normally thought of as peace, harmony, and prosperity. It is a life in motion and lived well. According to Sallade (2022:3), it is ‘a life lived in right relationship with God, with one’s environment, with neighbours, and with self.’

Flourishing as a biblical principle is found etymologically in Philippians 4:10. *But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity.* In this text, the Greek word for flourishing is *anathallō*. Its Hebrew counterpart is *parach*. Both Hebrew and Greek etymologies carry the basic verb meaning to revive, or blossom; to sprout, shoot, become apparent, or to break out. According to A.T. Robertson’s definition, it is ‘to sprout again, to shoot up, to blossom again’ (1931:460). The same notion is expressed by Vine (1952:966) that it is ‘to flourish anew, to revive.’ This agrees with the Setswana translation in this verse using *tsosolositse* which is reviving. This means, according to Bromiley (1985:57), *anathallō*, theologically, means ‘to cause to come forth,’ ‘to spring forth,’ (Heb 7:14 cf. Jr 23:5, ‘to shine forth’ (2 Pt 1:19, Nm 24:17). The prefix *ana* emphasises ‘again’ and together with *thallō*, render the meaning ‘grow

up again, bloom again' (Earle 1986:346). In Setswana we use the word *phophoma* which means to blossom or to possess abundance of leaves or fruits. It conveys an idea of overflow. There are three scholars who wrote about flourishing from the Protestant Reformed view. The first is Jantzen who defined flourishing by connecting it to flowers. She did etymological analysis of the word 'flourish by connecting it to the Middle English *florir* and the Latin *florêre*, which means to 'flower.' She concludes that to flourish is possessing the mass of flowers on a fruit tree, or the bloom of luxuriant, verdant growth. It means 'to blossom, to thrive, to throw out leaves and shoots, growing vigorously and luxuriantly.' In human sphere, to flourish 'denotes abundance, overflowing with vigour and energy and productiveness, prosperity, success and good health' (1996:61).

David Kelsey from Yale University is another scholar on the subject. He avoids associating flourishing with health and wealth like Jantzen does, though he uses blossoming and thriving as components of flourishing. He emphasises the elements of intrinsic dignity and value of human beings (2009:570). Interestingly, Kelsey reiterates that 'to blossom is 'to manifest the type of beauty of which a given life is capable by virtue of God's relating to it' (2009:315).

The third scholar did a doctoral thesis titled, *Imagining Human Flourishing? A Systematic Theological Exploration of Contemporary Soteriological Discourses* (2015). She argues that flourishing is all related to imago Dei, and that it is only when human beings turn towards God, they experience flourishing. She emphasises human dignity and the focus of the glory of God. For instance by appealing to some church traditions (Irenaeus of Loyn and John Calvin), she quips 'the glory of God is situated within the well-being of human beings is core to influential theological traditions...' (2015:23). This ties well with Kärkkäinen's (2015:427) assertion that 'Defining the image of God in terms of being related to God saves theology from anchoring human dignity in the possession of a quality or commodity, such as intelligence or health.' Elsewhere Marais gives a metaphor of the blossoming rose plant that in order to exhibit beauty, it has to possess signs of luxuriant vibrancy (in Van der Westhuizen 2020:83-84). Analysing her thoughts thoroughly, one picks that she is closely associated in thought with Jantzen than with Kelsey. However the bottom line in evangelical thought is flourishing conveys and carries both thriving, joy, and blossoming which is the display of both the fruit and the

gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Flourishing also means maintaining identity and remaining steadfast to what forms one in areas of character, actions, and the sense of fulfilment. That is why Lusko (2020:xix) asserts that:

When God calls us to flourish, it doesn't mean to become something brand new. It means to revive, to bring back to life what and who were meant to be. We weren't created to become something totally different but to become what we were originally designed for.

Examining this citation, one discovers that flourishing is not renewing or reconstructing ourselves but reclaiming who and what we were intended to become by Creator God's design. There are obviously some endeavours and deliberations towards discovering this identity and shaping into this character. We pursue this with exuberance and excitement in order to discover this identity and character, especially seeking their meanings for life purpose. 'We cannot simply eat, sleep, hunt and reproduce – we are meaning-seeking creatures' (McGrath 2022:88). Flourishing is the goal of these endeavours because it carries a sense of fulfilment. Sense of fulfilment comes as one starts to realise that:

God made us beautiful and to be drawn to the beautiful. We were created not only to look for beauty but to live beautifully, to seek inspiration, and to live an inspiring life even when we don't feel like it (Lusko 2020:18).

These deliberations are finding joy in what one was destined for. It gives the grandest sense of fulfilment if one discovers his or her original design and purpose for that design. In regard to this, Brümmer is of a strong opinion that:

We also need to have the physical, intellectual and personal capacities as well as the opportunities to become that which each of us would like to be and thus to realise what we consider to be our own true interests in life.

The evangelical understanding of flourishing is rooted in twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth (1932/1975), who provides understanding of human flourishing as the fulfillment of God's good purposes for humans including the dimensions of the relationship with God, and with others,

resulting in integrated life lived in a particular place and time. In other words, flourishing is the balanced vertical and horizontal relationships, involving the two-way relational links between God, humanity and creation. This is the trinitarian model with highest potential to offer harmony in cosmos. This is portrayed by Volf (2015:171) that flourishing is living in peace with ourselves and one another if our lives are not primarily about food and clothes, but about seeking primarily God's kingdom and God's universal righteousness. Moltmann (2007:69) takes the notion further that 'Creation and the self become free for what they are when God is loved and enjoyed in eternity for his own sake.' It is a mystical union of God, nature and humanity leading to human flourishing of rising out of indolence and joylessness into the life of hope.

The secular world equates flourishing with health, prosperity, fertility and longevity. Volf (2015:171) squashes this notion by promoting flourishing as contentment whereby people obtain happiness, and live responsibly to slow down environmental degradation, and seek the removal of social conflicts. It is the opening of the human spirit in love of God and all neighbours, those close by and those far away. The twentieth century theologian Moltmann published a book in 1989 titled *Creating a Just Future*. Although he does not directly address the issue of human flourishing, he makes some observable allusions to it. Moltmann recognises the reality that the cosmos is faced with global ecological, political and socioeconomic crisis. This *status quo* is due to human distortion of God's image and human misinterpretation of creation. He offers some solution that humans should return to a renewed gaze at the image of the triune God, simultaneously rediscovering an inspired imaging of the divine community of love (1989:54-56). Human flourishing is guaranteed through the return to the image of the triune God. In agreement with Moltmann's proposal, Augustine (2019:14) reinforces the fact that this return is essential for:

the mending of our own humanity as well as our common home, planet earth, as in the Spirit's renewing, socio-transformative work within the redeemed community – the church – the fellowship of the ones whose eyes have been open to see and ears to hear.

Once the humanity is in synchrony with the planet, there will be peace as one cannot uphold the dignity of the planet but exclude doing the same for humanity. Human flourishing is transforming the cosmos paradise. It

encapsulates all endeavours of experiencing heaven on earth, because ‘the theosis of humanity is the condition for the theosis of the rest of creation’ (Augustine 2019:31).

Human flourishing is when humanity immerses itself in the logos – the living Word, because this logos became human and dwelt among humans so that humans can have a free access to him through faith in the power of the Spirit. . Collins (2013:57) in analyzing Ratzinger’s dialogical theology captures the fact that ‘The culmination of this unfolding revelation of God in history is the entrance into the narrative of the figure of Jesus Christ. He is the dialogue, the encounter itself/between God and humanity in one person.’ This is a sacramental commitment whereby humans inhabit the Word as its place of abode. It is how community of believers become vocal through the Spirit. This cohabitation of humans with Christ, the world made by the Word can be restored to its original intention. It is when a Christian life starts to take its bearings from the living God, resulting in experiences of the fullness of life (Moltmann 2015:1)

The symbiosis of earth and humans, together with the *perichoretical* habitation of the trinitarian God in cosmos creates a stupendous opportunity for humans to experience and express flourishing through worship. Worship is both the duty and the pleasure of faith. It is the act of truly loving God and this love exploding out of the babbling heart full of love – flourishing. It is for this reason that Peck, Von Waldner and Kay (1990:89) declare that: ‘Yet it is from this attending and praising, working for a cause and gift-giving, that we human beings can derive our highest pleasures and deepest sense of peace and purpose.’ The flourishing humans are the worshipping beings. Through worship, humans enter the sphere of *theoformation* or *Christoformation*. They become malleable in order to be moulded into the likeness of Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who connects the worshiper and the worshipped.

5. Flourishing People are the Blessed People

It is not within the scope of this article to analyse the beatitudes, but to convey the general understanding of them and how they are related to human flourishing. It is pointed out that the blessed people are the flourishing people.

Bible scholars encounter and interact with the ‘blessed sayings’ known

as beatitudes in the opening verses of Mt 5:3-12 and Lk 6:20-23; the commonly known Sermon on the Mount, which ‘stands out as the greatest single sermon of all time, in its penetration, pungency, and power’ (Robertson 1930:40). Although the evangelical scholar, John Stott regards the Sermon on the Mount as a counterculture, he acknowledges that ‘it is probably the best known teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed’ (1978:15). At the center of its message is the call to repentance and righteousness, which are the two necessities towards flourishing. This sermon ‘describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God’ (1978:18).

There is an abundance of literature where the beatitudes are theologically and constructively defined and analysed, and are hermeneutically and exegetically etymologized. Etymologically, the phrase ‘blessed are’ implies the state of happiness or well-being. The New Testament Greek word, *makarios*, as applied in the Sermon on the Mount (Mathew 5 and Luke 6) does not refer only to ‘the characters that are blessed, but the nature of that which is in the highest good’ (Vine 1952:125). It is the gratitude received for fulfilling a certain precondition. This is confirmed by Frederick Hauck (quoted in Vine 1952:3) who claims that *makarios* ‘refers overwhelmingly to the distinctive religious joy which accrues to man from his share in the salvation of the kingdom of God.’ The word, *makarios*, was first used by Aristotle as a technical term for ‘beatitude’ (Bromiley 1985:548) to describe the blessedness that the gods enjoy and also ‘of men to denote the state of godlike blessedness hereafter in the isles of the blessed’ (TDNT:362).

Fundamentally, the word beatitude comes from the Latin *beatitudo*, meaning “blessedness.” The main or basic term from which Bible study commences is *macarius* which translates as blessed, happy and joyful (Coenen et al. 2012:182). In this context, it means “supreme blessedness” or “exalted happiness” although blessedness is, of course, an infinitely higher and better thing than mere happiness’ (Robertson 1930:39). The beatitudes highlight the amazing promised blessings that come when we develop certain righteous traits due to fellowship with God in the present age. The bottom line is that the beatitudes though they promise the brighter or positive future, are for the present blessedness. Their main objective is to teach a present blessedness rather than to promise

blessing in the consummation (Windisch 1951:175). This is captured also by Ladd (1977:73) that 'The Beatitudes expound both the eschatological salvation and the present blessedness.' Even Stott (1978:34) agrees that 'the promises of Jesus in the beatitudes have both a present and a future fulfilment.' The Beatitudes are not the rudiments into the kingdom of God but are virtues to be associated with a character of those who 'belong to the one who is already "elect of God, holy and beloved"' (Chafer 1978:216). Both Matthew and Luke express that

The Kingdom of Heaven is a reality already acquired, it is current, it is present, it is happening now; this is confirmed in the conjugation of the verb to be (is), found in Verses 3 and 10 of Matthew ... (Vila 2013:184)

The beatitudes are widely understood to be emphasizing the humble state of humans and their relationship with God. The closer scrutiny of 'blessed are' speaks of inner happiness spoken of in the beatitudes (Barnes 1977:43), and this happiness is God's gift of blessing granted to those who choose to be the people of faith. It is true that 'Blessed is a much richer and more inviting concept that describes a deep state of being and as an outworking of the right relationship with God (Francis, Strathie & Ross (2019:4). Pentecost (1980:20) drives this to the point that the Beatitudes are the characteristics of a righteous man and are the foundation of a happy life. By teaching them, Christ 'gave us the basis upon which God's blessing comes upon those who have received Him as a personal Saviour' (1980:20). This happiness is a result of one's acknowledgement or realisation of one's spiritual poverty (Matthew 5:3) and acknowledgement of one's total dependence on God (Matthew 5:5). One who has been blessed by God is a happy person. Happiness and flourishing are inseparable. Ellen Charry a Systematic Theologian from Princeton Theological Seminary is best known for her work on classical theology and a theological engagement with the topic of happiness (Marais 2015b:1). As far as Charry is concerned, theology 'is concerned with human happiness' (2004:19). For her, 'to discount the importance of human flourishing is to misunderstand theology and its purpose', since theology is (1) about life in this world and (2) about the enjoyment of this life in this world (Charry 2004:19). The holiness of God and the happiness of a person combine to make a person to flourish. There are themes that accompany flourishing, and they are captured by Bromiley (1985:548) as material goods, children, a marriage partner, bachelorhood, riches, a

good understanding, fame, righteousness, the release of death, and mystic initiation.’ The conclusion is that etymological declension of *makarios* is the inner qualities of divine joy and perfect happiness.

6. Conclusion

True flourishing is not for the opulent members of human race, but for the poor and oppressed who are rich only in pity, purity, peace, persecution, and remain perseverant, holding on to the hope of salvation. The beatitudes speak of the divine favour bestowed upon a person who possesses a certain character quality or experience peculiar to those belonging to the community of faith. ‘The beatitudes are Christ’s own specification of what every Christian ought to be’ (Stott 1978:31). In other words, they speak of idyllic state of utmost bliss where flourishing people experience abundant spiritual blessings. The beatitudes are not just instructive ‘conformity with human ideals but consist in knowledge of Christ, in hearing His sayings, and in doing them’ (Tenney 1978:147), which brings to conclusion that flourishing is the embodiment of being in Christ. A flourishing person is a person in Christ, which is where blessedness lies. These beatitudes commend spiritual qualities, the glorious promised comprehensive blessings of God’s rule tasted now and consummated later (Stott 1978:38). They become like a cucumber flourishing on top of the rubble heap. The beatitudes are the signs and promises of human flourishing. They are the qualities that are characterised not only by earthly happiness, but also a ‘likeness to God’ which is a participation in God’s self-giving love - the ministry of reconciliation in its deepest meaning (Macquarrie 1971:355). Flourishing puts believers above negative circumstances of life. Flourishing is *fruitio Dei* (enjoyment of God), which in a real sense is the enjoyment of life because of the relationship one has with Christ.

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The author declares that there is no financial gain or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced him in the writing of this article.

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