

Psalm 19 and Human Flourishing

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Human flourishing

“Human flourishing” is a cultural catchphrase that can be overheard in the hallways of corporate America and in the institutions of public and private education. In recent days, human flourishing has served as a warrant for doctrinal and moral-theological revision in the church as well. Due to its widespread usage across our culture, its susceptibility to multiple meanings, and its role in theological revision, some Christians have begun to disparage the language of human flourishing. I think this is the wrong tactic to take.

The church has a stake in human flourishing. The challenge for the church is to define and promote human flourishing (which we might otherwise describe as human well-being, human happiness) in accordance with biblical teaching, to present and commend its alternative approach to human flourishing in the face of competing cultural visions, and to embody human flourishing in the presence of God amid a culture of death and destruction. Christian theology has a role to play in assisting the church to meet this challenge.

Christian theology has a lot to say about human flourishing. Following the instruction of Holy Scripture, Christian theology instructs us about human flourishing by instructing us about human nature and about human nature’s relationship to law and gospel.

We may appreciate the true character of human flourishing by looking at Psalm 19.

Nature’s flourishing

According to Psalm 19, nature flourishes when it fulfills its God-glorifying aim by following its God-given course. Nature’s aim is to glorify God. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (19.1). Nature glorifies God by running the course given to it by God. The “circuit” of the sun’s rising and setting is the “course” that it runs (19.5-6).

Psalm 19 portrays nature’s flourishing by personifying nature as something capable of happiness and joy. The sun runs its course “with joy,” “like a

bridegroom leaving its chamber” and “like a strong man” running his race. Note well: Nature’s flourishing is *internal to* its course and its aim. Happiness is not something that comes in addition to nature’s fulfillment of its divine calling. Happiness comes within nature’s fulfillment of its divine calling.

Wendell Berry’s poem, “The Law That Marries All Things,” eloquently captures this reality:

The cloud is free only to go with the wind.
The rain is free only in falling.
The water is free only in its gathering together, in its downward courses, in its rising into the air.
In law is rest if you love the law, if you enter, singing, into it as water in its descent.
Or song is truest law, and you must enter singing; it has no other entrance.
It is the great chorus of parts. The only outlawry is in division.
Whatever is singing is found, awaiting the return of whatever is lost.
Meet us in the air over the water, sing the swallows.
Meet me, meet me, the redbird sings, here here here here.

The law and human flourishing

What is true of nature in general is true of *human* nature in particular.

Because it reflects God’s design for human nature, the law of God directs human nature to wholeness and happiness.

The law promotes human wholeness (19.7-8):

The law revives the soul.
The law makes wise the mind.
The law rejoices the heart.
The law enlightens the eyes.

The law promotes human pleasure and happiness (19.10):

The law is more desirable than gold.
The law is sweeter than honey.

The law directs us to live according to our design, according to our nature. When we live according to our design, we are happy and whole. What is true of nature more broadly is true of human nature more specifically: Happiness and wholeness are internal to God’s design for us.

C. S. Lewis illustrates the point well (HT Melissa Kruger):

God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.

The law promotes human wholeness and human flourishing because it directs us to God, the “lovely source of true delight.” The problem, of course, is that we are sinners, antinomians at heart. Sin thus thwarts the law’s happiness-promoting ends. Sin is the sworn enemy of human flourishing.

Furthermore, in humanity’s sinful and distorted state, the law becomes our enemy as well. The law declares us guilty. The law consigns us to Satan’s dominion. The law shuts our mouth and sentences us to death (Gen 3.8-24). In such a situation, the law cannot help us. The law cannot restore us to the path of happiness, the path that directs our lives to the glory of God.

The gospel and human flourishing

The psalmist harbors no Pollyannaish optimism about our fallen human nature before God’s law. Instead he casts himself wholly upon the mercy of God.

The law declares us guilty; the psalmist begs God: “Declare me innocent from hidden faults” (19.12). The law consigns us to Satan’s dominion; the psalmist begs God: “Keep back your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!” (19.13). The law shuts our mouth and sentences us to death; the psalmist desires to praise the Lord in the land of the living: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (19.14).

In the gospel, God answers the psalmist’s pleas for mercy. Through the mission of God’s incarnate Son and the outpouring of God’s Spirit, God’s grace restores and perfects human nature.

God’s grace doesn’t accept us “just as we are.” To do so would be to consign us to a life of perpetual misery. While we were without strength before God’s law, Christ died for us (Rom 5.6). When we were ungodly, God justified us freely, apart from our good works (Rom 4.4-5). But the God who justifies fallen human beings through the gospel also restores and perfects human nature through the gospel. The Lord, our rock and redeemer, not only declares us innocent of our faults. He also keeps us back from presumptuous sins and doesn’t let them rule

over us; he also opens our lips that our mouths may proclaim his praise. He glorifies himself by making us “fully alive” (Irenaeus).

Grace heals our misery and ministers happiness by instructing us how and empowering us to be human again. The gospel teaches us how to walk in God’s law and how to live for God’s glory through union with Jesus Christ. In Christ the old and miserable man is crucified and the new man—the flourishing man—is reborn by the renewing power of the Spirit of life. “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8.3-4).

As the law is fulfilled in us—through the Son by the Spirit—human nature is put back on the path (“who *walk...*”) of human flourishing to the glory of God.

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