

Flourish: 1. The Ideal
1 Corinthians 13:5-8; Colossians 3:21
January 31, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

Here's the dictionary definition of flourish: **“grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as the result of a particularly favorable environment.”** And we want that for our children. We want the best for our children. I haven't told you about my grandson recently. We spend Mondays together and sometimes another day, and as I interact with him I am continually reminded of the times our daughter was his age – which seems like yesterday. We get at least 18 years with a child in our home and when that begins, it seems like such a long time – there are some phases that seem like they will never end, but it goes quickly.

I remember when our first child was born. We thought we were prepared. A room was painted. We had the furniture, the clothing, the diapers. We went to classes to learn about childbirth. But the night Amanda said “it's time” it felt so sudden and unexpected. And when she was born, there were nurses who checked on us and were willing to do whatever was necessary to care for this child. But then, they told us we could take her home. What were they thinking? They were sending her home with us and they weren't coming with us? No one checked to see if we knew what we were doing. We needed help just figuring out how to put the car seat in the car. Just because I was a parent didn't mean I knew how to be a parent. Fortunately, soon after we arrived home, Amanda's mother came, and she seemed to know what she was doing. And then other people from our church – they came and suddenly we had advice from all sorts of people and places about what kind of parents we should be. But we had to figure out not just what parents we wanted to be, but what sort of person this child could be – and would be.

For the first 16 years of her life, I was working in children's ministry and youth ministry – and I learned a lot about parenting from the kids in our church and their parents – what seemed to work and what seemed not to work. And then one day, I attended a national conference of the Children's Defense Fund, which is an advocacy organization for children, and during one of the break-out sessions I walked down a hallway looking for the session I would attend when I noticed a room that was so filled with people that there was a crowd standing outside the door, trying to listen. With all that interest in whatever the topic was, I decided I would try to attend this one. I was able to squeeze into the room and find a place on the floor. This session would change the way I parented our children – and the way I related to all children and youth. That day, I was introduced to virtues – God-given gifts that exist within each of us. From scripture, we learn that we are created in the image of God. That's not a physical image but a spiritual image and the virtues are a way to describe that image – unique to each of us and yet the spitting image of our Creator.

There are some people who look at a child as if that child were a lump of clay to be shaped and molded and even forced into the image a child should become. And the parent's job is to do the shaping – not alone, but the primary shapers, (lump of clay) like a potter with a lump of clay. But that Virtues Project helped me see a different way of understanding my role. The children whom God has entrusted to my care are like seeds that have been planted in this world and like a seed there is within each child what God has already gifted that child – and my job is to provide the conditions so that child can flourish and become like this beautiful flower (flower). Fragile and yet strong and beautiful. I want that for my children. I want that for my grandson. I want that for all children. I want this ideal image that each child would become everything that God created them to become. And the best way that I can help a child flourish is to be the very best person that I can be and to have the very best marriage that I can have.

When I meet with couples who are preparing to be married, we always discuss what they have learned about marriage and family from watching their own parents. Because that will be their default way of being a husband, a wife, a mother, a father. Without realizing it, we spent 18 years being mentored into a role we might one day take for ourselves. And our laboratory of learning how to parent was watching how our parents parented – not that it has been predetermined that we will become our parents, but our default without being purposeful to choose another way is to parent as we were parented. Which makes the job of parenting the toughest job any of us will ever have.

Let me pause here and consider the past year – unlike any year that any of us have experienced. Many times Amanda and I have wondered how we would manage if we had children living in our home. A few days ago, I spoke with Sue Strom, a member of Messiah Church who is a teacher and interventionist in one of the Wayzata Elementary Schools. I asked her what she has been hearing from parents. **[video #1]** That's the real. We want to give our children the best but in reality it is hard and the unexpected happens and we don't always know what to do. The Bible recognizes that. It is filled with examples of families that did not get it right. In other words, we will make mistakes, and God never gives up on us. One of Jesus' disciples would write: **For God so loved the world...** That means the world as it is, your life as it is, your family as it is with all the bumps and uncertainty and mistakes. For God so loved the world, **that God gave his only Son.** God sent Jesus to acknowledge the reality of where you are, to offers grace and acceptance, and to provide a better way.

Though Jesus did not talk specifically about parenting, he did talk about behavior. And it's your behavior more than your words that will model an Ideal for children. And that was behind the new command that Jesus gave us – to Love. At the center of following Jesus is Love – and love is a behavior. Left on our own, we experience this clash of wills – and I'll talk more about this next week. There is this clash of wills when we place ourselves at the center of a relationship instead of love. In today's scripture, Paul tells us what love looks like – how love behaves. I think this is actually a teaching for parents and for all who care about children. He gives us a place to begin and it's just three words. Remember these three words: **Love is patient...** How did he know? Love is patient. This is behavior. Slow down and move at someone else's pace. Love is not pushy. It's patient. Our daughter Bethany gave me this painting for Christmas. **[slide]** It shows my mother and my grandson walking back to the house after getting the mail from her mailbox. He had just learned how to walk. And if you have ever walked next to a child who is learning how to walk, it takes patience. It may be easier and quicker to just pick up the child, but what I love about this painting is that my mother was moving at the pace of her great-grandson. And that's what love looks like – to move at another person's pace, to move at our child's pace. And if we don't, we end up separated. I go one direction and my kids another, or they don't keep up with me or I push them beyond their capacity. The one thing Paul says directly to parents is **Parents, don't provoke...** Don't move too fast. Don't try to outsmart them or frustrate them or battle wills. Because if you do, ... **that ends up discouraging them.** And when we get discouraged, we lose motivation, we give up – on the relationship.

Love is patient. Your job is not to make your child turn out a particular way (lump of clay) but to flourish (flower) as only God can do. Inspire, motivate – yes. Discourage – no. I asked Sue Strom about providing a foundation for children. **[video #2]** Walking beside each other. Do you hear Paul's words? Love is patient. When our daughter, Bethany finished college, she had a theater degree in costume design. It didn't seem like a promising career path to me, but then it wasn't my job to pick her career path. She moved home and decided to be a cosmetologist which took a year of school and added to her debt load. She had this dream of moving to

Hollywood and working in movies. The day she loaded up her car to drive to Hollywood, not knowing anyone – it was all I could do to take the car keys from her and say you can't do this. This is not what you should be. But my job was and still is to walk beside. Love is patient. We gave her enough to pay for one week in a hotel, and I gave her the name of a pastor of a church in Hollywood. And somehow, she made it and she worked in Hollywood and picked up a lot of experiences – some good and some not so good, and after a few years recognized that was not who she should be. And I learned a lot about patience. Last Monday, I was carrying her son and our grandson, helping him fall asleep for his afternoon nap. And once again, I thought about patience. Have you ever tried helping a child fall asleep? There is no way to force that. For 15 minutes, we walked back and forth through the house until finally he laid his head on my shoulder and together we fell fast asleep. Love picks up on another's pace.

So, here's your homework: Who feels rushed by you or feels unnecessary pressure to the point that it is pushing the relationship away? How could you adjust your pace? Because I don't want you to lose a relationship. Love is patient.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 31, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Lord God, you created each of us and placed us within families. Sometimes it is the people in our families who are the hardest for us to love and respect. Unite us, Lord, in spite of our differences. Help us to be persons of love and encouragement, ever mindful of each person's special place in your kingdom. Amen.

Monday, February 1

Scripture: Ephesians 4:29-5:4

Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ. Therefore, imitate God like dearly loved children. Live your life with love, following the example of Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. He was a sacrificial offering that smelled sweet to God. Sexual immorality, and any kind of impurity or greed, shouldn't even be mentioned among you, which is right for holy persons. Obscene language, silly talk, or vulgar jokes aren't acceptable for believers. Instead, there should be thanksgiving.

Observation: This passage lists key qualities that destroy relationships, and others that heal them. Treating one another in un-Christlike ways ("bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil") greatly damages relationships. On the other hand, letting Christ change your life from the inside out opens you to bearing fruits like compassion, kindness and a forgiving heart. God works through these qualities to strengthen (and heal when needed) our relationships.

Application: Today's reading is not just about how we behave outwardly. It didn't say, "Behave nicely toward others no matter how much you despise them inside." God offered to transform us inwardly, in ways our outward behavior will then reflect. How can you open yourself to allow the Holy Spirit to shape you into a person who can more fully live out the call to be "kind, compassionate, and forgiving"?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me not to hide from or rationalize anger or bitterness you make me aware of inside myself. Do your transforming work in me, shaping me into a good relationship partner. Amen.

Tuesday, February 2

Scripture: Matthew 7:1-6

“Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. You’ll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ when there’s a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you’ll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s or sister’s eye. Don’t give holy things to dogs, and don’t throw your pearls in front of pigs. They will stomp on the pearls, then turn around and attack you.

Observation: When one person regularly judges another as inferior or wrong, that hurts any friendship. The same attitudes can do even more damage to closer relationships. It is important for us to address why we feel a need to criticize and judge a relationship partner, and “First take the log out of your eye”! (At the same time, verse 6 made it clear that Jesus did not call anyone to be a naïve victim in an abusive relationship.)

Application: Jesus used a hyperbolic image (the log in your eye) to remind his hearers that we all have faults, and so we all need mercy. Recognizing our own failings makes us more forgiving toward others. How can honest self-evaluation, and openness to hearing what bothers your partner or friend or child, help build a relationship that makes both of you stronger, rather than tearing each other down?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep me healthily aware of my strengths while still being able to “take the log out of [my] eye” before trying to correct or improve others. Amen.

Wednesday, February 3

Scripture: Matthew 7:9-14

Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.

“Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.

Observation: In this passage, Jesus summed up the big ideas he taught in the Sermon on the Mount, including God’s wisdom about human relationships. He told his hearers to love their enemies, be honest, show mercy, and more. Those were not separate, individual rules, from which we could choose which to follow. They expressed the great principle of treating others as God treats us, and as we wish others would treat us.

Application: In law, business or politics we often hear the idea that we should treat people according to what they deserve. Sometimes we bring the same idea to marriage and family relationships. Jesus spoke of treating people as God treats us – with grace and generosity,

rooted in self-giving love. What good things can happen in a marriage and a home if love and grace replace “deserving” to guide us in mutual love and sharing?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to live less demanding and more in line with your teaching. Help my default setting be to treat others the way I wish they’d treat me. Amen.

Thursday, February 4

Scripture: Matthew 7:24-27

“Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn’t fall because it was firmly set on bedrock. But everybody who hears these words of mine and doesn’t put them into practice will be like a fool who built a house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It fell and was completely destroyed.”

Observation: Jesus ended his Sermon on the Mount with this image of two builders. They both built houses during the dry season, when the *wadis* of Palestine, like *arroyos* in the American Southwest, looked safe and harmless. When the storms came, they washed the house built on sand away. The wise person thought ahead and built a house on a foundation that would endure.

Application: Some marriages and families (or other relationships) look fine. Then something (illness, job loss, a poor choice) shakes the foundation, and shatters the relationship, at times beyond repair. No matter how beautiful life may look today, it will rain in your life eventually. What are you doing daily to build a character and a quality of relationship(s) that will be able to weather life’s storms?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for loving me durably, dependably, forever. Guide me in building my life on the principles of your kingdom, so that my life and relationships can withstand any earthly storm. Amen.

Friday, February 5

Scripture: Ephesians 5:18-33

Don’t get drunk on wine, which produces depravity. Instead, be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts; always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and submit to each other out of respect for Christ. For example, wives should submit to their husbands as if to the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife like Christ is head of the church, that is, the savior of the body. So wives submit to their husbands in everything like the church submits to Christ. As for husbands, love your wives just like Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. He did this to make her holy by washing her in a bath of water with the word. He did this to present himself with a splendid church, one without any sort of stain or wrinkle on her clothes, but rather one that is holy and blameless. That’s how husbands ought to love their wives—in the same way as they do their own bodies. Anyone who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hates his own body, but feeds it and takes care of it just like Christ does for the church because we are parts of his body. *This is why a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two of them will be one body.* Marriage is a significant allegory, and I’m applying it to Christ and the church. In any case, as for

you individually, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and wives should respect their husbands.

Observation: At first, these verses tend to make us wince inwardly. (People too often read verse 22 all by itself, which greatly distorts the passage’s meaning.) Paul used a common Greek and Roman form of writing about family relationships called a “Household Code.” But he adapted it in ways that strikingly altered its message. Traditional household codes instructed male heads of households how to rule; Paul instructs husbands here only how to love self-sacrificially. Read in full, this passage set a high standard of mutual love and respect for both marriage partners.

Application: The New Testament often used familiar cultural language, but unlike the first century Greco/Roman culture’s pattern, it didn’t speak to only one relationship partner. Ephesians 5:21 said, “Submit to each other.” “Submission” was a mutual duty, not something only one partner gave while the other took. (The same was true, by the way, for parents and children.) When have you seen a healthy relationship built on mutual “submission”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you walked among us as genuine love incarnate. Help me understand love in ways beyond the sentimentalism my culture often confuses with love. Let your love be a robust force making every life I touch better. Amen.

Saturday, February 6

Scripture: Galatians 5:22-26; 1 Corinthians 13:1-8, 13

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the self with its passions and its desires. If we live by the Spirit, let’s follow the Spirit. Let’s not become arrogant, make each other angry, or be jealous of each other.

If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don’t have love, I’m a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and I know all the mysteries and everything else, and if I have such complete faith that I can move mountains but I don’t have love, I’m nothing. If I give away everything that I have and hand over my own body to feel good about what I’ve done but I don’t have love, I receive no benefit whatsoever. Love is patient, love is kind, it isn’t jealous, it doesn’t brag, it isn’t arrogant, it isn’t rude, it doesn’t seek its own advantage, it isn’t irritable, it doesn’t keep a record of complaints, it isn’t happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. Love never fails. As for prophecies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end.

Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love.

Observation: In Galatians, the apostle Paul named some qualities God offered to grow in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 13, after discussing the gifts of the Holy Spirit in chapter 12, he listed traits of the love that we must have to be able to use any of the Spirit’s gifts as God intended. Who wouldn’t want those qualities in a spouse, a family member, a friend or a coworker? Yet it’s hard to live these ideals fully in this life. Paul knew that: “We know in part,” he went on to write in 1 Corinthians 13:9. But the ideals we aim for matter.

Application: Reflect on the qualities Paul listed in today's readings. Which of them most appeal to you, and seem to come most naturally? In which, if any, of your day-to-day relationships are you able to readily and easily live out most of the things Paul listed? In which relationships is it a struggle to show these qualities, even with gritted teeth? How do you believe the qualities with which you struggle would deepen and enrich your closest relationships?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, plant your fruit in my heart, and teach me how to be good soil in which that fruit can flourish. Let me be a person who gifts others with love, joy and peace. Amen.