

The Pursuit of Happiness: A Practical Theology of Human Flourishing

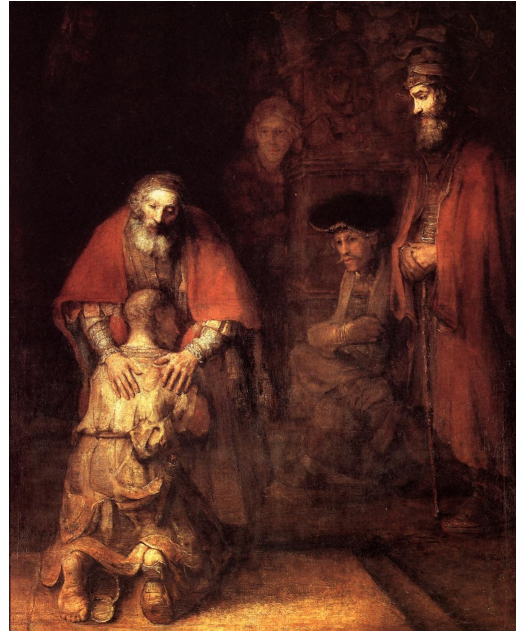
McMaster Divinity College
May 26-May 30, 2014
Course code: MS 2XH3

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Specializations: Pastoral Studies (PS),
Christian Worldview (CW), Church and
Culture (CC) and Pastoral Care and
Counselling (PC).

Course Description

In a world where sorrows and setbacks are common, how can people flourish? What makes people truly happy? What role does the church play in human welfare? In addition to offering a uniquely theological exploration into these questions, this course will identify and probe practices that sustain the church and provide resources for pastors, teachers, leaders, and all others interested in seeing themselves and their communities flourish. Together we will investigate the fundamental human desire for happiness, how it is addressed in Scripture, and ways in which the church can create space for it to be nurtured and addressed.



Course Objectives

Knowing

- To know the contours of an ethics of desire.
- To become familiar with the Bible's perspective on happiness.
- To identify the ingredients that enable human flourishing.
- To locate practices that sustain the church.

Being

- To reflect theologically on the fundamental desires of humanity.
- To identify obstacles and barriers to flourishing in one's life and

- community.
- To mature into a holistic, communal, and theologically-grounded happiness.

Doing

- To cultivate the ability to exemplify and impart the theological wisdom of human flourishing to others.
- To articulate a uniquely Christian account for human flourishing.
- To implement sustaining practices in one's life, church, and community.
- To develop pastoral strategies to enable others to flourish.

Course Textbooks

Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012.

Jean Vanier, *Made For Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle*. Toronto: Anansi, 2001.

Recommended Texts

Brent A. Strawn, ed., *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*. New York: Paulist Press, 1979.

Course Requirements

1. Two Book Reviews

- a. Write a book review of one of the following three Henri Nouwen books:

Henri Nouwen, *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986.

Henri Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer and Contemplation*. Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1979.

Henri Nouwen, Donald McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*. Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1993.

Length: 5 pages

Grade: 15%

Due: May 28, 2014

- b. Write a second book review of one of the following two accounts of Nazi mistreatment in concentration camps and the possibility of forgiveness:

Elie Wiesel, *Night*. New York: Bantam Books, 1982.

Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. New York: Schocken Books, 1976.

Length: 5 pages

Grade: 15%

Due: May 30, 2014

2. Class Participation

Students will be graded on their attendance, participation in discussions, and contribution to the overall learning environment.

Grade: 10%

3. Major Essay

Write a paper about a sustaining practice for today's church. Include in your paper a history of the practice, a theological interpretation of the practice, reasons why this practice will sustain the church in this culture, and recommendations for how this practice might be implemented in the church. The paper should demonstrate comprehension of course materials and familiarity with the required texts.

Length: 10–12 pages

Grade: 40%

Due: June 27, 2014

4. Practical Assignment

Prepare a sermon, Bible study, poem, painting, short film, short story, or song about an ingredient in human flourishing.

Length: 5 pages

Grade: 20%

Due: June 27, 2014

Course Outline

Monday

PM: An Ethics of Desire

What especially constitutes humanity? Throughout history, in both ancient and modern times, people have been depicted as rational, thinking animals. The church father Augustine, however, judged that we are best characterized as creatures of desire and love. If so, what implications does this have for our ethics, and how we live? In this segment we investigate the Greek philosopher Aristotle's contention that we are driven by a fundamental quest for happiness and, as such, for friendship, pleasure, truth and justice. We will also identify and assess sources of happiness for people today including, for example, wealth, materialism, and power.

A Theology of Flourishing

Recent decades have witnessed the introduction of a new school of thought within psychology dubbed "positive psychology" which identifies, on the basis of social scientific research, the variables that enable humans to flourish. In this segment we will look human flourishing from a theological perspective, paying close attention to God's purposes for humanity in creation and for the eschaton (i.e., the new creation).

Tuesday:

AM: Flourishing in the Old Testament: The Psalter as a Window

How does the Old Testament conceive of human flourishing? In this segment we will look at the Hebrew Psalter as a way to access the Old Testament's teaching on happiness. Specifically, we will look at the beatitudes embedded in the Psalms (e.g., "How happy is the one who . . ."), as well as the notion of desire (i.e., the longings of the soul) and relate these concepts to the contrasting phenomena of human misery and lament.

PM: Flourishing in the New Testament: The Beatitudes as a Window

The beatitudes Jesus preached, in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, are well-known and well-loved, but what do they convey about the possibility of human happiness and how do they compare with contemporary understandings of happiness? What, if any, significance do we draw from these formulations declaring to be happy those whose lives are typically devoid of happiness (e.g., the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, etc.)?

Wednesday:

AM: Gratitude and Contentment

Here we will look at the economics of gift-giving, the nature and function of gratitude and its effect in individual and communal life. We will also identify threats to gratitude, including entitlement, envy, and constant industry, as well as complications involved in gratitude. Lastly, we will look at ways to strengthen gratitude and probe ways to live an explicitly grateful life. Furthermore, we will investigate the rare virtue of contentment. Why is our society, and its people, so discontent? What are the enemies of discontentment?

PM: Compassion and Forgiveness

The compassion of God in Jesus Christ forms the basis of our compassion; we are to be compassionate as He is compassionate. But what does it mean for us to live compassionately? Here we will study compassion in relation to community, solidarity, prayer, and patience. Similarly, human forgiveness is patterned after God's forgiveness in Christ. What, essentially, is forgiveness? Is forgiveness an emotional disposition or a verbal declaration or both, or something else altogether? Must we always forgive those who offend us? How can forgiveness be extended to heinous criminals?

Thursday:

AM: Hospitality and Empathy

Hospitality is related, etymologically, to our words "hostel" and "hospital." We are helped by thinking of hospitality as creating space to be a "hospital" for people we encounter. In this segment we will consider diverse ways in which we can volunteer space within our minds, our lives, and our homes for others. Like hospitality, empathy is also other-directed. If sympathy is feeling for someone's pain, empathy is feeling someone's pain. Here we will look at the sources of empathy-deficits, how empathy can be nurtured, and the value of empathy for human flourishing.

PM: Community and Civility

The vast space that separates the legislative government from the individuals who inhabit a particular society is called the civic sphere. In times past, this space was filled with numerous voluntary and communal civic organizations and associations (e.g., bowling leagues, the Rotary Club, etc.). Today's society, having become increasingly fragmented and

suspicious, is populated by people who yearn for community. How do we foster community within our churches and cities and promote the virtue of civility within our society?

Friday:

AM: Promise-Keeping and Truth-Telling

Fidelity has been trivialized in our culture, and we want to discern the root of this shift. The failed promises of politicians, diet plans that don't deliver, and warranties that aren't honoured have made us cynical about fidelity. What is involved in promise-making and promise-keeping? How do promises function in relationships and what implications do broken promises have? What place do vows and oaths have in today's society, and role should they play? Are there promises we shouldn't make? We will examine models of promise-keeping, the conditionality and confidentiality of promises, and the virtue of faithfulness.

PM: The Flourishing Church

In this concluding segment, we will tie together what we've learned in this class to create a portrait of a flourishing church—namely, a community which promotes human flourishing within and outside of its perimeters.

Miscellaneous Information and Policies

1. Textbook Purchase

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College's book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 145, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class but are available for advance purchase at READ On Bookstores, 304 The East Mall, Suite 100, Etobicoke, ON M9C 5K1; phone 416.620.2934; fax 416.622.2308; email books@readon.ca. website: <http://www.readon.ca/>

2. Statement on Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty is a serious offence that may take any number of forms, including plagiarism, the submission of work that is not one's own or for which previous credit has been obtained, and/or unauthorized collaboration with other students. Academic dishonesty can result in severe consequences, e.g., failure of the assignment, failure of the course, a notation on one's academic transcript, and/or suspension or expulsion from the College. Students are responsible for

understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. Please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty
<http://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/programs/rules-regulations>

3. Style

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses
www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/sites/default/files/documents/MDCStyleGuideMarch0413.pdf
Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

4. Gender Inclusive Language

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all of its publications. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected. The NRSV and TNIV are examples of the use of inclusive language for human beings. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments.

5. Deadlines and Late Submission Penalty.

Assignments are due to the instructor by email by 11:59pm of the due date. They are to be submitted in Word format. The penalty for late submission of assignments is 1% per calendar day.

Bibliography

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