

**WHEN  
HELP  
IS NEEDED**

**A Biblical View of  
Counseling**

## **WHEN HELP IS NEEDED**

Ruth is an attractive 35-year-old woman who is married to a man who seems to have no major flaws. Pete has rarely raised his voice throughout their 15-year marriage, has never hit her, is a faithful provider, and is good to the kids.

But Ruth is bored. She feels dead inside. Untouched. Missed. "He really doesn't have the slightest idea of who I am. He rarely pays any attention to me, to what I am wearing, to my perfume, or to how I may be feeling. He never asks how my day went."

Ruth and Pete are both Christians. They know God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). But for the first time in her life, Ruth is questioning how long God expects her to endure the boredom of this relationship. She feels as though she can't continue like this anymore.

This isn't the first time Ruth has felt the pangs of boredom. In the past she would remind herself of the commitment she made to love, honor, and keep him "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." She would firmly recommit herself to try harder and then occupy her every waking moment with the myriad of tasks of being a housewife and a mother of two preschool children.

But once her children were in school, she had so much free time on her hands that it intensified her loneliness. So Ruth went out and got a part-time job as a secretary for a small business. Her boss, Bill, is a sensitive man who enjoys talking with her. He listens attentively, drawing her out with his questions. Occasionally he takes her to lunch, where they laugh and talk about things Ruth yearns to be able to share with Pete.

Ruth feels both wonderfully alive and terrifyingly vulnerable when she's at work. This sensitive man has made her feel special again, not unimportant and taken for granted. She even has fantasies of being married to Bill, which frightens her. She asks herself if she is being drawn into an affair. Part of her says she would never do that. Yet the consequences of an affair pale in comparison to the vitality she feels when she's with Bill. All she knows is that she feels more alive now than she has felt in years. And she doesn't want it to end.

What if Ruth were your friend and she confided in you about her struggle? What would your reaction be? What if instead of marital boredom and extramarital temptation, she told you a story of:

- eating disorders or sexual addiction
- uncontrollable outbursts of anger
- alcohol or drug abuse
- debilitating depression
- anxiety that steals one's sleep
- paralyzing fears
- obsessive/compulsive activities
- loneliness

- workaholism
- uncontrollable spending

Would you be inclined to think that Ruth's problems were spiritual or psychological? Would you refer her to a pastor or to a counselor? Would your pastor have time? Would you expect the counselor to talk about the reality of sin and the need for repentance and obedience to God?

More important, if Jesus were walking on earth today, do you think He would advocate going to a counselor for help with one's struggles? Or would He see the "counseling industry" as something that is missing people's real needs and distracting them from pure devotion to God? (2 Cor. 11:2-3).

*Tim Jackson, a licensed counselor in Michigan, is the senior counselor for the RBC biblical correspondence department.*

---

## **IS COUNSELING AN OPTION?**

There is reason for caution in answering this question. Someone has counted more than 250 approaches to counseling. Each of these schools of thought claims to be successful in understanding human problems. All have developed a model of how people are supposed to function, what goes wrong, and how to intervene when problems become unmanageable.

The influence of these varied theories on Christian counseling has created a growing debate in the church. People are divided over whether we need more than the Bible, prayer, and faith in Christ to deal with our problems. Many disagree about the meaning of "the sufficiency of Christ." Do His provisions and mercies include medication, support groups, and an understanding of family history, temperaments, and deeply buried motives?

What we do know is that wise people look for help when facing the problems of life. The book of Proverbs encourages us to look for good counselors, while being just as careful to avoid the bad ones. Proverbs 11:14 says, "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety." Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise." And Proverbs 20:5 adds, "Counsel [purposes, motives, and plans] in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out."

Proverbs also makes it clear that good counsel can come from many sources, some as close as a friend. Proverbs 27:9 says, "Ointment and perfume delight the heart, and the sweetness of a man's friend gives delight by hearty counsel."

What is just as true, however, is that counsel can be as dangerous as it is helpful. Psalm 1 says, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly" (v.1). There have always been counselors who have told people what they *wanted* to hear rather than what they *needed* to hear.

---

## **WHAT ABOUT SECULAR COUNSEL?**

The Bible warns against any counsel that is contrary to the purposes of God. But the Scriptures are not against all that is natural, social, or secular. The book of Proverbs indicates that the voice of wisdom can be heard in the streets and marketplace (Prov. 1:20-22). Solomon taught his readers not only to become students of the Word of God, but also to listen attentively to the voice of nature and human behavior.

School counselors serve our communities well when they influence young people for good by encouraging preparation for the future and by discouraging the evils of drugs, alcohol, and sexual promiscuity. Many students have been helped by counselors skilled in guiding a student to think through his own values, beliefs, and motives.

Medical professionals also offer invaluable services that can complement spiritual solutions. I once had a woman come to my office complaining of a severe battle with depression. It sapped her vitality for living to the point that she was unable to function at home and care for her three preschool children. Thoughts of suicide plagued her daily activities. She had just been released from a 3-week stay at a hospital mental health unit and reported that the psychological therapy had made very little difference. Her husband was totally frustrated with her and was at his wits' end.

After several extended conversations with her, which seemed to be equally unhelpful, I asked her when she had her last complete physical. As we discussed her health, she had mentioned that she felt as though she was "losing her mind." She had hot flashes and then was extremely cold within minutes. Her menstrual cycle was erratic.

She had all the symptoms of a woman going through menopause. But that didn't seem possible. She was only 34. I asked when her mother went through menopause. She said at 32. And her grandmother? Her early 30s. But because she didn't fit the normal profile for a woman going through menopause, all doctors she had visited had consistently ruled it out.

She made an appointment with a new gynecologist, who performed some specific tests and found that she had the estrogen level of an 80-year-old woman! Soon after she started estrogen hormone therapy, her depression lifted. All the counseling in the world would have only frustrated her because she had no control over how her body was responding.

## WHY ARE SOME PROBLEMS SO RESISTANT TO CHANGE?

As we have just seen, some problems are complicated by medical factors, which if undetected can result in great frustration and unnecessary guilt.

It is just as true that many physical and emotional problems are rooted in unseen and often undetected spiritual issues. Eating disorders, alcohol and drug addiction, depression, chronic anxiety, sexual abuse, and multiple personality disorders are so painful in and of themselves, that they persistently mask the deeper issues that fuel them.

Alcohol addiction is painful, but not nearly as painful as the memories or fears that an alcoholic is trying to numb. Addictions are difficult to break because they seem to ease the pain. The same is true of food and sexual addictions. They are hard-to-break habits because they work--for the moment. The immediate pleasure and satisfaction temporarily dulls deep feelings of disappointment, rejection, and anxiety.

The fact that we "hate ourselves in the morning" only makes us more susceptible to go back to our vice for another pain-killing moment. The cycle goes on and on, and we sink deeper and deeper. The more we indulge our desires, the more satisfaction they demand.

But there is an even deeper reason that such problems are resistant to change. According to the Bible, the painful problems of life are complicated by the fact that whenever we choose to take solutions into our own hands, whenever we attempt to kill our pain with another drink, another trip to the refrigerator, another illicit sexual encounter, we are displacing the rightful place of God in our lives. Instead of believing that He is the source of life and all that we really long for, we worship at the altar of wine, or food, or sex. Instead of believing that God is the only One who can satisfy us, we worship idols that are in the shape of our obsession, idols that are to some degree under our own control.

Often we do not see what is happening. Our addictions remain rooted because our hearts are masters of denial. It is easier just to sweep our problems under the carpet than to deal with them. We say things like: "I can stop when I want to. I don't need to go for help. I've shown some bad judgment, but I'm not out of control. I don't need to talk about it. I'm not hurting anyone but myself. I don't really have a problem. A lot of other people are a lot worse off than I am. I'll be okay. Besides, there's nothing anyone else can do for me right now. I don't need to see a pastor. I don't need to see a counselor. I just need some time to get myself together. I'll change. You wait and see."

Denial. Self-deception. Lies. Jeremiah understood why some problems are so resistant to change when he said, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9).

Our thinking can become so twisted and darkened that we choose to do things we know to be wrong and yet feel powerless to change (Rom. 7:7-25). Up becomes down and down becomes up. That's where Ruth is. She is on the verge of being willing to choose something she *knows* to be wrong (an extramarital affair). But at the moment, she *feels* it

is more life-giving than anything the Scriptures may offer. Feeling good at any price is replacing her pursuit of God.

Ruth is abandoning the simple yet life-changing truth that Jesus is *the way, the truth, and the life* (John 14:6). Proverbs 14:12 is being played out in her life: "There is a way that seems right to a man [or woman], but its end is the way of death." The emotional intimacy she is enjoying with Bill *feels* more like life than the deadness she feels when she is with her husband.

We've all been there at one time or another. We've all lost our way, thinking east was west and north was south. We've all chosen solutions that have made our problems worse. We've struggled within ourselves, with God, and with others, in ways that have left us feeling battered, scarred, deeply wounded, and defeated.

Those are the times when we need the help of a wise friend who will gently, but courageously, help us to see how we are responding to our disappointment and fear. It is during those tough times--times when our faith falters, when our vision of the road ahead is blurred, when we don't see any light at the end of the tunnel, and when there seems to be no sense to life nor any reason to go on--that we need the wise counsel of someone who can be more objective than we are at the moment.

It is during those tough times that we need to come to the end of ourselves and in brokenness become open to the help of God and others. We need a heart like the one Jesus called for when He said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Mark 4:9).

---

## **WHAT KIND OF COUNSEL DO WE NEED?**

Whether we are seeking guidance from a pastor, friend, parent, or professional, we are faced with another question: How can we know if the guidance we are getting is trustworthy?

When it comes to problems of the heart and relationships, the Bible must be the standard by which we recognize good counsel. It is the mind of God. It reveals His thinking and His heart. The Bible helps us to ask and answer questions like:

**[Is the counsel helping me to deal with the truth or just helping me to believe what I want to believe?](#)**

**[Is the counsel dealing with the issues of my heart or merely focusing on my behavior?](#)**

**[Is the counsel balanced or one-sided in its view of my heart?](#)**

Is the goal of counsel to make me healthy, or is its goal to make me godly?

Is the counsel moving me toward self-protection or toward the risk of right relationships?

---

## WHAT KIND OF COUNSEL DO WE NEED?

### **Question 1**

**Is the counsel helping me to deal with the truth or just helping me to believe what I want to believe?**

Is the counsel I am getting helping me to be realistic about the troubles and opportunities of life? Is it helping me to be honest about my own frustrated desires, aching disappointments, and secret struggles? Or is it helping me to ignore the truth of what is really happening and to believe what I want to believe?

When Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33), He was giving us a realistic view of this present world. He spoke from personal experience. He was known as a "Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is. 53:3). He knew what it was like to be misunderstood by people He loved (John 1:11). He experienced the rejection of His family and closest followers. He was betrayed, hated, and abandoned. He was verbally and physically abused.

Yet the same commitment to truth that caused Jesus to face and feel the sorrows of life is what kept His eyes on the greater truth and freedom of heaven. Showing us that what we believe is all-important, Jesus said, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32).

The truth of Christ is rooted in God. Jesus taught in the tradition of the Old Testament, which says that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10) and "the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7).

Bad counseling does not begin with God, but with man. It teaches people to believe that we create our own reality and that we can be anything we want to be. When bad counseling does recognize God and the power of faith, it often teaches people to believe that God will give people of faith anything they ask and believe Him for.

Good counseling helps us to face our disappointment in a trouble-filled life. It helps us to face our disappointment in ourselves and realize that very often we cannot make life work for us or protect us from pain. Good counseling helps us to

face our disappointment in a God who doesn't give us everything we ask for (2 Cor. 12:7-10; James 4:3).

Good counseling shows us that truth is a double-edged sword. Sometimes it is a healing balm that soothes our weary souls. At other times it cuts deeply and exposes us to pain that feels overwhelming. Truth will set us free, but first it will make us sick--to the point that the Great Physician's restorative touch is the only cure.

King David is an example of one who experienced this restoring touch of God after being confronted with the truth he had been running from. Second Samuel 12:1-14 describes how the prophet Nathan was sent by God to confront and counsel King David concerning his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the brutal murder of her husband. Nathan set a trap for David by telling him a story about a rich man and a poor man. The wealthy man, according to Nathan, owned great flocks of sheep. The poor man had nothing but one pet lamb who ate from the poor man's own plate and drank from his own cup. Yet in spite of the fact that the lamb "was like a daughter" to the poor man, the rich man took the beloved pet, cooked it, and offered it to a guest for dinner.

Since the king was a former shepherd, Nathan knew he would have David's full attention. When Nathan had finished telling the story, David was outraged and demanded justice.

Nathan then sprung the trap and David heard the dreaded words, "You are the man!" David was crushed and broken by the exposure to the wickedness of his heart. He had tried to cover it. But there was no hiding from the eyes of Nathan. He was caught red-handed and there was no place to hide. In repentance, he confessed his sin and became known as a man after God's own heart.

Nathan was a wise counselor. He used truth effectively to disrupt David and expose him to his sin. Only then could David experience again the passionate heart of the God who loves with an everlasting love that never lets go.

The truth sets us free by helping us to become people of courage who never pretend.

---

## **WHAT KIND OF COUNSEL DO WE NEED?**

### **Question 2**

**Is the counsel dealing with the issues of my heart or merely focusing on my behavior?**

God places a priority on dealing with the internal roots of our problems so that the observable fruit of our lives can also be pleasing to Him.

While the Bible is a book of action, it is first of all a book of the heart. It is a book that continually addresses the unseen motives and underlying beliefs that shape our behavior and attitude toward issues. Proverbs 20:5 says, "Counsel [purposes, motives, and plans] in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out."

Good counsel continually asks the question, "Why?" Why do I want to get out of this marriage, quit this job, adopt a baby, switch counselors, or look for another church? Why? Am I running from my problems? Am I loving, or am I trying to get even? Am I facing my sin, or am I trying to cover it up? Why am I so critical of my wife, my child, my employer? Is it because my love for them is causing me to lose control, or am I pointing the finger to keep the attention off my own faults? What are the unseen motives? What are the underlying beliefs?

Jesus made it clear that good counsel must dress not only behavior but issues of the heart. To some of the most religious people of His day He said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also" (Matt. 23:25-26).

God certainly is interested in how we act. But He is far more interested in *why* we do what we do than in merely *what* we do. In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, the apostle Paul made it abundantly clear that we can do many wonderful things for all the wrong reasons. The only valid motive for doing anything is love. Anything not done for loving purposes is worthless in God's eyes. The author of Proverbs wrote, "All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD" (Prov. 16:2 NIV). "The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the hearts" (Prov. 17:3).

The writer of the book of Hebrews indicated that counsel based on the Word of God cuts through to the core realities of the human soul, to judge and evaluate the very "thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:12-13). It is imperative that we give attention to our motives because they, as much as our actions, will be the object of God's evaluation when we stand before Him (1 Cor. 4:5).

---

## WHAT KIND OF COUNSEL DO WE NEED?

### Question 3

#### **Is the counsel balanced or one-sided in its view of my heart?**

Counseling is dangerous if it treats us as people whose hearts are full of motives that are either all good or all bad. It is dangerous if it leaves us feeling as though none of our thoughts or emotions are legitimate. It is also dangerous if it treats us as basically good people who've had more than our share of bad breaks.

Counsel needs to help us see the difference between legitimate, God-given desires and our own foolish attempts to satisfy those desires. Good guidance must help us to sort out the dignity of desires that reflect our creation in the likeness of God and those twisted strategies that reflect the depravity of our fall into sin.

On the side of dignity, the Bible shows us that there are no mere mortals. All of us have been fashioned in the likeness of our Creator (Gen. 1:26-27). All of us live in the image of a God who loves and is loved in heaven.

While there is much about our three-in-one God that we don't understand, we do know that within the relationship of the Trinity, there is eternal love, mutual honor, and cooperation. Because we have been created in the likeness of this triune God, all of us have a deep need for relationships. We hunger to love and be loved by others. We want to know and be known, to accept and be accepted, to respect and be respected, to give and to receive, to care and to be cared for. For this we have been made. For this we rightly hunger.

But the paradise of the relationship that was enjoyed for a while by our first parents has been lost. The image of God in each of us has been deeply marred and scarred by the devastating consequences of sin that occurred at the fall of man in the Garden (Gen. 3). Thus, what we each experience in our daily lives is a twisted and distorted existence that is a far cry from what God originally intended for us to enjoy. The ravenous hunger for restored intimacy that screams for fulfillment within each of us demands satisfaction now.

When persons or circumstances do not cooperate and give us what we want, we become murderous in our rage (James 4:1-3). We don't want to face the terror that we are out of the Garden and that our longings will never be fully satisfied until heaven. Because we refuse to wait that long, we find counterfeit ways of either soothing our hunger or destroying it so that the pain of our unmet longings will somehow be quieted.

This mix of dignity and depravity is what makes so many problems extremely resistant to change. The desires that drive an alcoholic are not all bad. The urges that obsess the homosexual are not all wrong. Husbands or wives who, like Ruth, feel more alive and fulfilled in an extramarital relationship are not totally evil in their longings. The problem is that legitimate desires become terribly confused with wrong beliefs and foolish strategies. We end up feeling guilty for God-given desires and then rationalize and defend our illegitimate strategies for trying to deal with our pain.

Good counsel will help us to see the difference between God-given desires and our own sinful strategies for satisfying those desires. Counseling at this level will expose our deep and stubborn resistance to the truth. It will not treat us as being better than we are. Neither will it treat us as being worse than we are. But we must not minimize the importance of seeing how evil our own unseen strategies and underlying beliefs can be.

We must not miss what our sin tells us about the condition of our own heart. Only in the context of being overwhelmed by the devastating news about how bad our situation is will we passionately and gratefully embrace the good news of the gospel! Only then can we see how desperately we need Christ's payment for our sin. Only in the awareness of our own helplessness can we see how much we need the gifts of His grace, His mercy, and His forgiveness.

---

## **WHAT KIND OF COUNSEL DO WE NEED?**

### **Question 4**

**Is the goal of counsel to make me healthy, or is its goal to make me godly?**

A longing for wholeness and health is a legitimate personal desire. The New Testament writer John wrote, "I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 2-4).

John's prayer for wholeness and health reflects a loving and legitimate longing. His prayer does not, however, reflect what the Lord is going to do for all of us in this present life. While the Bible views good health and material prosperity as blessings from God, it also shows us that God didn't give the apostle Paul wholeness of health, even though he earnestly prayed for it (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Instead, God gave him peace to live with his "infirmity" and said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Much "wholeness" and "health and wealth" teaching contains elements of truth. But it doesn't give enough emphasis to the hope of heaven. The Bible makes it clear that in this fallen world some will be wealthy and some will be poor. Some will be healthy and some will be sick. Some will live long lives and some will die young. Yet beyond all of the inequality and apparent unfairness is a hope and promise of wholeness and completeness that God assures in the next life.

The author of Psalm 73 had an especially difficult time accepting this truth of future wholeness. He couldn't understand how a good God could let some people prosper and not others. He even came to the place where he envied the wicked, for he said, "They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men" (v.5).

This man admitted his disappointment with God. He admitted his utter frustration and confusion at not being able to get God to answer his prayers. But then he went into the house of God, and suddenly he saw life in light of the eternal. Suddenly he saw those who were healthy and wealthy and godless heading for a quick and terrible reversal of circumstances. Then, with the coming day of judgment in view, the psalmist exclaimed to his God:

I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry. But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all Your works (Ps. 73:22-28).

As a result of such godliness, dependence on God will increase. Dependence on our ability to figure it all out and to make life work on our terms will decrease. Something tense inside of us will begin to relax. Enjoyment of God and His Word will grow. Enjoyment of life will grow in direct proportion to our deepening enjoyment of the living God, "who gives us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17), and who has far more waiting for us.

King David is an example of this kind of godliness. As a man after God's own heart, he experienced in his life wealth and poverty, health and sickness, close relationships and betrayals. He knew the meaning of prosperity. Yet, seeing how temporary any physical blessing can be, he wrote, "In Your [God's] presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). It is only in the overwhelmingly glorious presence of our great God that we finally come to enjoy the fullest potential of all that we were originally designed to enjoy. That's heaven!

---

## WHAT KIND OF COUNSEL DO WE NEED?

### **Question 5**

#### **Is the counsel moving me toward self-protection or toward the risk of right relationships?**

While there is a place for caution and wisdom in relationships, some counselors encourage their clients to become overly focused on past hurts. Teaching self-reliance and self-protection to avoid further harm, such counselors urge, "Be your own person!" "It's your turn to finally get what you want out of life." "Don't ever let anyone take advantage of you again." Self-reliance is the key to not being used or abused by others. This kind of counseling develops an air of stubborn independence in the person. People so directed are apt to become tough, arrogant, and controlling rather than more tender, compassionate, and loving.

Good counsel should help us come to grips with the fact that when God calls us to love others and to expose ourselves to the dangers of interdependent relationships, He knows He is asking us to take risks. But He offers to be our security, our provider, and our hope when others reject our love or when they refuse to tolerate our failures.

God's offer is far better than most of us realize. He is the only Person in the universe whose love we are always assured of. He is the One who knows us best, flaws and all, and still loves us the most.

Self-protection is the opposite of the kind of faith and love that God has made us for. He asks us to prove our faith in Him by being willing to live not just for our own interests but also for the interests of others.

Appealing to what believers say they have found in Christ, the apostle Paul wrote:

If there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love [God's love for us], if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others (Phil. 2:1-4).

Paul could make such a call to right relationships because he knew that God is the strength, the safety, and the reward of all who allow Him to lead them into the risky arena of love.

Jesus said that others will know that we are Christians not by how well we can articulate our theology, but by how well we love others: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

John later said that the quality of our relationship with God is measured by the quality of our relationships with others. He wrote, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" (1 John 4:20). Our personal relationships with family, friends, and co-workers become opportunities for each of us to demonstrate our love for God. In essence, since no one has seen God, we are given the high privilege to become God's tangible representatives to give others a taste of His love, mercy, and grace in the way we relate to them (1 John 4:12).

Counsel that emphasizes the relational implications of everything we do is counsel that reflects God's passionate concern for relationships. It helps us to understand the selflessness that is required to love others the way God has loved us (John 15:12; 1 John 4:11). Such counsel also helps us to see our own inability to love as God does, until our Lord Himself changes us from being self-conscious to other-conscious (John 15:5).

We are loving well when we no longer are as self-conscious in our relationships with others. Loving others becomes far more important and far more of a priority than protecting ourselves at all costs. This does not happen overnight, but it does happen as we become more and more aware of how much God loves us and how secure we are in Him.

---

## **WHEN DO I GO FOR COUNSEL?**

Most people wait too long to go for counsel. They wait until the problem is of such crisis proportions that it is almost too late to do anything more than damage control. If you have waited until your problem has become a crisis, you already have two strikes against you. It doesn't mean that you won't eventually get on base, but why put yourself in such a disadvantaged position? Don't wait until a problem is so chronic or so severe that professional counseling is a last resort.

The time to seek help is:

- when you feel increasingly discouraged and confused about life.
- when you feel that something is bothering you, but you aren't sure what it is.
- when you feel that everyone is against you.
- when you find yourself unable to get a handle on your anger, fear, worry, or sleeplessness.
- when you keep hearing from others that you're being unreasonable or insensitive.
- when you find yourself thinking seriously about how to get out of your commitment to a relationship or a job.
- when you are wrestling with an issue that will have significant effects on yourself and others around you.
- when you are unable to change behavior that is harming yourself or others.
- when you have secret compulsions that feel out of control.
- when there is a pain within yourself that is not being resolved by the normal channels of asking forgiveness, admitting you've been wrong, and seeking reconciliation.
- when you keep having thoughts of not wanting to live.

This is when you should seek help--not necessarily from a professional, but from your family, friends, neighbors, small group, or pastor.

---

## **A NOTE ABOUT PASTORS**

### **What is the pastor's role as a counselor?**

A pastor is in a very difficult position. His congregation expects him to be an eloquent orator, an ardent student of the Word, an astute administrator, and an all-wise counselor. The problem is that no man, however gifted he may be, is capable of doing all those things extremely well. A pastor is to shepherd the flock (1 Pet. 5:2). He is to be the pastor-teacher of his people to equip them for evangelism and mutual edification.

Because of the time constraints on a pastor, extensive counseling sessions with many people would monopolize all of his time and energy. So please don't resent or be critical of your pastor if he refers you to someone else who is in a better position to help you. He may realize that his strengths and gifts are in areas other than personal counseling. Or he might be doing some counseling but simply does not have the time to make additional commitments.

In a best-case situation, your pastor will refer you to a lay counselor in the church or to a professional, and then check with you from time to time to see if your

needs for counsel are being met. It is just as important that you be sure the help you are getting is consistent with biblical values, Christ-centered faith, and godly pastoral oversight.

### **What is the role of the Christian community?**

The Bible clearly teaches that there are resources for growth and restoration in the Christian community that are available nowhere else. Hebrews 3:13 tells us to "exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." The author went on to say, "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:24-25).

One of the purposes for our church community get-togethers should be to provide a supportive context, where we can bear one another's burdens and encourage one another when we feel like giving up. While this cannot take place in a large teaching or preaching service on a Sunday morning or evening, it can take place in small group gatherings in homes at other times during the week. How it is structured may vary from church to church. But a small-group setting will facilitate the kind of love, sharing, confidentiality, accountability, and encouragement that will help people to deal honestly with the everyday struggles of life in a way that brings honor and glory to God and joy to their hearts.

God attaches a great deal of importance to our involvement in relationships that encourage our spiritual growth and well-being. This is seen in the "one another" texts of the New Testament (Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 15:5,7,14; Gal. 5:13; Eph. 4:2; 4:32; Col. 3:13,16; 1 Thess. 4:9,18; 5:11; 1 Pet. 1:22).

---

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING IS NEEDED**

Professional counseling is sometimes necessary to deal with complex issues that don't easily yield to our normal understanding of how we are to grow and deal with the struggles in our lives. This kind of intense counseling is like doing deep surgery on the soul. As in any other surgery, you must be able to trust the person with the scalpel. But surgeons aren't perfect. Sometimes they misdiagnose a problem. Sometimes they cut a little too much. No process of surgery, either on the soul or on the body, is foolproof. But you must take the responsibility to discern who would be the best counselor for yourself. Asking yourself the following questions should help.

**1. Is the counselor willing to talk with you about his or her view of the process of counseling?** If not, don't go. A counselor who is unwilling to answer questions concerning his own values and the approach he uses is not worthy of your time or money. Reputable counselors should have some kind of a printed disclosure statement that explains their training and how they view the whole counseling process.

It's impossible to separate the counselor from his counseling. The two are inextricably bound together. His philosophy of growth and change comes out of his personal theology of life. How does he view and define the problem of sin? How does he describe the process of change?

Be a responsible consumer. After all, you are paying for this professional's help. Going to a licensed counselor or therapist is like going to your medical doctor for a physical problem. You have the right to know exactly what his diagnosis of the problem is and what intervention procedures he is recommending. Don't be afraid to seek a second opinion if you feel uncomfortable with what you have been told.

**2. What is the counselor's view of the problem?** Does the counselor make such a sharp distinction between psychological and spiritual issues that he sees the Lord as useful for, but not indispensable to, the process of change? This question focuses on the counselor's view of sin.

The issue of personal sin and the part it plays in your struggles must not be simply relegated to the obvious behavioral level of: "Yes, it is wrong to have an affair, so you shouldn't have one." There needs to be a commitment to going deeper into your motives for choosing activities that are so self-destructive. The function of your sin needs to be exposed.

Will this counselor make recommendations that are immoral? For example, some Christian counselors recommend using erotic videos to increase a married couples' sexual activity when there has been a struggle in that area. While it may produce the desired results (increased sexual activity), the process of arriving at the desired result is immoral and directly opposed by Scripture. The methods as well as the goals of counseling must reflect biblical thinking and values.

**3. What is the counselor's view of the process of change?** The counselor's primary task is to open the door of a person's life to help him see the dynamics of the dignity and depravity that he has difficulty seeing for himself. The counsel should be both deeply disturbing and enticing--disturbing, in that sin should become exposed in all its horror so that it is seen as absolute foolishness; enticing, in that the truth has the power to draw you into a relationship with a gracious and merciful God, which increases your passion for life and heaven.

**4. Do you feel cared for by the counselor?** Some counselors will work better with your neighbor than with you. That is the nature of any relationship. And

counseling is just that, a relationship with someone who cares enough about you to tell you the truth in a way that makes you feel deeply exposed and deeply respected. If you cannot respect the person who is providing the counseling, if he lacks integrity in his own personal life, then look elsewhere. Don't give up. Keep looking. God will lead you to a mature counselor who can help.

---

## A SUMMARY OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING

Counseling that is biblical includes the following basic assumptions:

**1. We can understand our human experience only when we remember that we are made in the image and likeness of the Creator and Provider of the universe.** Little can be understood about ourselves unless we remember that we were made to find satisfaction and meaning only in a condition of dependence on the One who made us. This allows for enormous implications in dealing with our insecurities, fears, anxieties, and discouragements.

**2. We can honestly face and deal with the way others have sinned against and deeply wronged us only when we recognize that our own sinfulness is our primary problem.** Other issues, as important and worthy of discussion as they may be, are not primary. We can begin to make significant strides in dealing with our problems only when we realize how inclined we are not to trust God. We need to see what happens when we fail to trust Him and begin to demand that He and others come through for us on our terms.

Putting other people or things into the role of Provider is our fallen obsession. It is what causes us to turn violently against ourselves, others, and even God, when we are disappointed.

**3. Our biggest need is forgiveness, not personal wholeness.** An obsession with personal wholeness puts our focus on what we do not yet have. It feeds the idea that we deserve more than we now have. We are inclined, therefore, to be dissatisfied and frustrated with life. We demand satisfaction now.

The truth is that no one needs anything more than the mercy and forgiveness of God. It is only by God's mercies that we are not consumed. It is only because Christ bore our sins in His own body on the cross that we can be freed of the shame and guilt that would otherwise separate us from the One who alone is able to protect and provide for us in this life and the next.

People who focus on the mercy of God are increasingly grateful, content, and loving. As they are overwhelmed by the generous mercy of God, they find it impossible to turn around and violently attack those who do not come through for

them. As God has given them mercy, they give mercy and kindness. This is the way of a heart filled with and energized by the Spirit of Christ.

**4. If we are going to experience real change, we need a change of heart that results from brokenness over our sin.** This repentance (a change of heart and mind) is far more important than getting insight. It is a willingness to see that our sin is more important than our pain, and that nothing is more important than experiencing the forgiveness and mercy of Christ.

The Lord's counsel to us is, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29).