

Counseling like the Wonderful Counselor

Counseling. What comes to mind when you hear that word? After I had experienced a really hard second year on staff with Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship, my supervisor, an older and wiser man, encouraged me to seek out counseling. I remember in that moment as a young man thinking that counseling was only for people who were really *messed* up. Needless to say, I wasn't really that interested. Thirty years later, I think counseling would have been really helpful!

How about "biblical counseling"? What comes to your mind when you hear those two words? For some, you may picture something like this...

Bob Newhart "Stop It" video (3:32)

"Stop it!" If only it were that easy, huh? Unfortunately, there have been some who have counseled under the banner of Christ who have been overly simplistic or harsh in their approach. Just obey. Just do it. Stop it.

But these individuals are not the biggest problem with biblical counseling. I believe that there are two more subtle obstacles that keep us from caring more effectively for one another. One is what I faced as a young man: there is still a fair amount of baggage for people, especially men, when it comes to the word "counseling". So let's nip that one in the bud right now. Let's use some different terms that avoid the negative stereotypes. For example, many churches and leaders today use the terms soul care or Biblical soul care, congregational care, or personal ministry. I will use those a lot this morning.

A second obstacle that we can tackle right away is the misconception that "counseling" is for just a few selected professionals or pastor-types to do. If that's your thinking, not so quick...

If you think about it for a moment, it doesn't take long to realize that we all give counsel. We just don't always realize that is what we're doing. For example, do neighbors or co-workers share their problems freely with you? Do you listen empathetically to someone who is struggling with grief in your Connection Group? How about disciplining your children or Upward players in an effective way? Or helping your young adult think wisely about schooling, a job, or a future husband or wife? Or if you're a student, how about those times when you're trying to warn a friend to not continue in a destructive direction? You see, we all give counsel on a regular basis. **It's just a matter then of what kind of counsel we're going to give...** Is it going to be biblical? Filled with God's wisdom and hope? Gospel-based? Or us just sharing our ideas? Does our helping hurt, or point people effectively to life in Christ?

This morning I get to teach our fifth message in our series "Like Jesus". And hopefully all of you have honed in on our topic today: We are to counsel like Jesus. Let's **pray**:

Holy Spirit, please help each one of us—men, women, and young people, to better learn how to care for the souls of others. In Jesus name, amen.

Before beginning here as the Upward Director last summer, I was the Pastor of Congregational Care at a large church in the Quad Cities. I enjoyed the opportunity to grow in my understanding and practice of Biblical Soul Care. It was during this time that I developed a ministry conviction that was lost on me before. This conviction is our big idea this morning: **We are *all* called to *counsel* like Jesus counseled.**

Let's continue to unpack the first part of this thesis, this idea that we're *all* called to engage in personal ministry.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Romans 15:14. That will be in the middle of your New Testament, on page 949 in the Bible beneath the chairs. We'll be looking briefly at a number of texts this morning. As Paul nears the end of this letter, he encourages the Romans to follow Jesus' example. He then points out how Christ is the hope of both the Jews and the Gentiles. Then in verse 14 the apostle states, "**I myself am convinced, my brothers (and sisters), that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another**" (NIV).

The ESV Study Bible footnotes are helpful to us here: The Greek word for **instruct** is *noutheteo*, which means instruct, admonish, warn, and counsel. All of God's people—not just a few select few—should be able to instruct, admonish, warn, and counsel one another. Paul throughout his letters encourages ordinary Christians to practice the "one-another's". You may remember Kyle's "one-another" slide during his first message on prioritizing like Jesus prioritized. We are expected by God to serve one another, forgive one another, pray for another, and many others, including the call to impart wisdom and care. The Scriptures say that we are competent to counsel.

What is helpful to grasp at this point is that there are different levels of biblical soul care.¹ The first level is called **directive level**. This is the basic level of care that every Bible reading Christian should be able to give, and should be taking place in every Connection Group. Someone at this foundational level is someone you can share your tough stuff with, knowing that they will have the compassion to listen, and to speak the truth in love as needed.

The second level of soul care is called **corrective level**. This would involve a fewer number of people in the church family, people who have been gifted by God and have also received some training. In my former church I oversaw a team of about fifteen men and women who were able to meet with those struggling with more difficult issues.

The third level of soul care is called **intensive level** counseling. In a church this size it would be a handful of individuals who have had more extensive training and experience, and may be professional. They are able to handle the most difficult situations that arise.

We are all called to participate in the ministry of the Word. We are not all called or gifted to preach, but we can all humbly pass on the things that God has taught us in the Scriptures and in our walk with him. We may never step into a pulpit, but we can sit in a restaurant booth and talk over a cup of coffee. We are *all* called to counsel like Jesus counseled.

But *how* did Jesus give counsel? Did he have the disciples lay down on an early Mediterranean style couch and ask about their early childhood? I'm sure the thought crossed his mind a time or two with some of those more dysfunctional disciples. Peter's impulsiveness. James and John's anger issues. Bartholomew's mood swings. Not really on Bartholomew, I just feel sorry for how he is always left out!

One of my ministry mentors has been Garrett Higbee, who is now the Executive Director of the Biblical Counseling Coalition. In his Biblical Soul Care training he uses the acrostic C.A.R.E. to lay out a helpful primer on how to do personal ministry. As you will shortly see, there is little doubt that Jesus modeled each of these basics as he ministered to others.

The “C” stands for “**Connect**”, to connect **with Christ-like compassion**. Communicating love and acceptance is the beginning place for effective biblical soul care. The word compassion literally means “suffer with”. Job’s three friends take a lot of flak, but they started off really well! After hearing of Job’s calamity, they wept, and sat with Job for seven days, without speaking a word to him.² Christ’s compassion dwelling in our hearts not only causes us to weep with those who weep and be there for people, but to pray for them and serve in practical ways.

Remember the time when Jesus healed the woman with the issue of blood? She reached out in desperation and faith and touched his garment, and not only received physical healing from Christ, but emotional as well. Jesus insisted on finding out who had touched him in faith, and once she came forward, he addressed her as “daughter”, a term of endearment. He also told her to go in peace, in shalom, a new state of being for her, a wholeness, after being ceremonially unclean and marginalized for twelve years. Jesus connected with her with a beautiful compassion.³

Imagine being in your connection group and someone takes the risk to confess a long-hidden secret sin. What a great opportunity for compassion! What an opportunity to live out Christ Community’s value of transparent relationships! By offering a culture of humility, acceptance, and grace, this person can begin to receive the healing that they need. It’s when we keep our battles private that they can exercise complete mastery over us. Or as **Proverbs 28:13 puts it: “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”** As we learn to be safe groups and individuals, people will open up with us and receive the mercy and compassion—the unconditional love—that their hearts long for. Let’s connect with Christ-like compassion.

The “A” in C.A.R.E. is to “**Assess motives and desires of the heart**”. What we don’t want to do in our care for others is to deal only with symptoms. Band aids are good for paper cuts, but not so good for amputations. In the same way, we need to learn to deal with the root issues, not just the outward behavior. Most of our sinful behavior and desires can be traced back to one of four basic heart struggles: anger, foolishness, fear, or despair. Beneath all of these lurks pride, a whole-hearted commitment to the kingdom of self, whether boastful or given to self-pity.

For example, there are times when I struggle with how I eat. I know that’s hard to believe with my girlish figure. But it’s true. Way back in high school, and to this day, I have had a pretty serious relationship with a young girl named Debbie. My problem is that I often eat to numb pain, to make myself feel better. It may sound harmless enough, but what is going on in my heart that I would choose to find comfort in sweets, rather than in the God of all comfort? For me, this behavior can be traced all the way back to pride: God did not give *me* what *I wanted* during my day: comfort, ease, the approval of others. So I therefore respond like a brute beast and willfully seek comfort in lesser gods.

Did Jesus care about people’s hearts? Listen to these words from Becky Pippert in her great book “Out of the Saltshaker”:

“God created us for himself. If we are living with any center other than Jesus, we will be living incompletely. So Jesus continually tries to *help people see who or what controls them...*”⁴

Another way of saying this is that Jesus will not compete with our idols. I love the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10. Turn there briefly with me if you would. Luke is the third of the four gospels if that helps you to find it. **Read Lk. 10:38-42.**

Here we have an example of an idol being exposed in Martha's heart, and how Jesus gently but firmly pointed it out. Martha was totally wrapped up into serving, so much so, that it distracted her from the Lord himself. Her desire for control and perhaps the approval of others grew out of an anxious, fearful heart. Jesus said, "You are anxious and troubled about *many* things." You get the sense that Jesus is not just speaking to Martha about her stress in that moment, but to a life that was marked by anxiety. Jesus then points to Himself as the one necessary and good thing, the one whose feet we would all do well to sit at. Her stressed-out, demanding behavior was an indicator that something was awry in her heart. She was suffering from a worship disorder: her *service* for God had been placed ahead of God.

How can we assess the motives and desires of people's hearts? **Proverbs 20, verse 5**, paints us a helpful picture, and gives us hope that we indeed can be discerning. **"The purpose in a man's heart is deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out."** Solomon describes our heart as a deep well, it's inner workings are not going to be found on the surface. Some effort, some tools will be necessary to draw it out.

Let's look at the one tool that is essential in assessing the motives and desires of the heart. Are you ready? Learning to ask good questions. Probing the heart with open-ended questions is a skill that all of us can grow in. For many of us our default is to want to fix things too quickly, to show off our knowledge, or give a hasty diagnosis. Instead, let's follow Jesus' example. He asked over three hundred questions in the gospels, and they were often aimed at the heart. Let's go back even further. What does God do in Genesis 3 after Adam and Eve sinned? He does not arrive on the scene and level accusations or pronounce judgements on the hiding sinners, but asks the question, "Where are you?" Obviously God did not have a broken GPS or was terrible at playing hide and seek. He wanted to give Adam an opportunity to confess and repent, to demonstrate his seeking heart.

Learn to ask x-ray, or door-opening questions like...

- ◆ How can I help you?
- ◆ What do you mean by that?
- ◆ On a scale of 1-10, how bad is it?⁵
- ◆ If I only had _____, I'd be happy.⁶
- ◆ Brent Thomas asked me this one several years ago: "How's your heart?" I'll get back to you someday on that, Brent!
- ◆ Jeff Meyers, the President of Summit Ministries, encourages people to not always give answers, but ask "What do *you* think you need to do?"⁷ Teen-agers love that one!

It's nearly always a good practice in soul care to simply ask some good questions and listen during your first time together.

Let's connect with Christ-like compassion, and assess motives and desires of the heart.

But if we would counsel like Jesus counseled, we will also **respond with grace and truth**. I agree with Kyle from last week that it's no accident that grace is listed first in John 1:14 where it says that "Jesus was full of grace and truth". Good biblical soul care understands the importance of surrounding needed

hard truth, rebuke, or correction with the acceptance, blessings, and promises that we have in the incarnate Christ. It is God's kindness that leads us to repentance, Paul said in Romans, and we would be wise to follow suit.

However, we should never be bashful or apologetic about sharing life-giving biblical truth to those who are thirsty. The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture gives us great confidence. To summarize 2 Peter 1:3 and 4, the sufficiency of Scripture states that God's Word gives us all that we need for life and godliness. 2 Timothy 3:16 says that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped **for every good work.**" In my past and recent soul care with others, I have been blown away time and time again at how God's Word gives people just what they need, no matter what their issue. His word equips us for every good work, which includes the good work of counseling.

How did Christ demonstrate responding in grace and truth? One example that comes to mind is an interaction that he had with our friend Peter. In Luke 22 we see that the disciples have just engaged in their favorite activity, which was debating among themselves about who was the greatest. Jesus, as you would expect, corrected their mindset and called them to servanthood. Then he looked at Peter and said these words:

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Peter said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me."—Luke 22:31-34

Did you catch the combination of grace and truth in Jesus' words to Peter? He first tells him that he has Peter's back—he has been interceding for him and doing spiritual battle on his behalf. He then gives him the assurance that because of his prayers, Peter's faith would not fail, that he would be restored, and that he was to strengthen his brothers. There is a lot of grace in these statements by Jesus, but it was a mixed bag, wasn't it? There would be sifting involved, and an attack on his faith by Satan himself. Jesus then speaks an even harder word of truth to his overconfident disciple: "You will deny three times that you know me". Ouch! I don't think Peter thought for a second that he was capable of such cowardice, but Jesus got the paper all the way to the porch on that one. Jesus counseled with both grace and truth.

How can we go and do likewise? Gracious words flowed from Jesus' lips partly because of his incredible humility. The same must be true of us. When someone comes to us with a problem, it does not put us in a position of superiority. No, we're just a jar of clay, a humble vessel that carries the treasure of the good news.⁸ We know how much we need the gospel every day. And if our soul care involves conflict, we humbly take on the posture of the bigger sinner. Or as Jesus put it so memorably in the Sermon on the Mount, we recognize that we have a log in our eye, while our friend has only a speck.⁹ And of course, our humility means that we lean constantly on God in prayer, asking him to grant us wisdom, and to work powerfully to bring needed heart change to our friends.

Effective soul care that employs both grace and truth means that we must *know* the truth. Or to use the imagery of the author of Hebrews, we need to know how to use our sword! Hebrews 4:12-13 says

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edge sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (NIV)

God’s Word has a supernatural ability to discern what is going on in our hearts. Its effectiveness is found in its extreme sharpness, a dull sword would actually be more painful and even destructive. No patient on the operating table wants a doctor to use a blunted scalpel when doing heart surgery! However, because it is so sharp, this sword needs to be handled with care. That doesn’t mean you have to get a special degree or certificate or be ordained in order to counsel effectively. But it does mean that you need to be a beaver for your Bible, to read it regularly and prayerfully, and know how to hold your shining sword up like a mirror to help hurting people see where they need the gospel and God’s wisdom in their lives.

The “E” in the acrostic C.A.R.E. is to **encourage with hope**. A person struggling with depression, for example, is in dire need of hope. Christian community can be a great source of just that. When our Biblical Soul Care team was helping a person who was despairing, we never did it alone. We discovered that there was a real wisdom in inviting an advocate to join in the sessions. This advocate was someone who had been through a similar struggle or was simply a spiritual friend who could be an ongoing encouragement. I didn’t know the phrase at the time, but it was definitely an example of connecting people to life-defining relationships in Christ!

Sometimes a hurting person simply needs to be reminded that something good is coming in the future. It may be a reminder of the glories of heaven, or the assurance that God is at work in their lives for his glory and their growth.¹⁰

(Conclusion)

So if we would counsel like Jesus counseled, we will connect with Christ-like compassion, assess motives and desires of the heart, respond with grace and truth, and encourage with hope. However, this is where the rub is. It’s not knowing these things that is difficult, but it’s doing them, right?

What about all the times that you don’t feel any compassion? When you’re tired and irritable? When you see the difficult person in the grocery store, and you decide to walk the other way?

Or how about the times that you would rather just dispense patent advice rather than do the slower work of assessing motives and desires of the heart? When you are content just slapping a band aid on a gaping wound, knowing that there is an idol that is being unchallenged in their lives and you don’t have the courage or time to pursue that with them...

And how about responding with grace and truth, or encouraging others with hope? How often do we bypass the grace and just go for the jugular? Or for others of us it is just the opposite: because we fear people and need their approval, we are unable to confront them in their sin, even though it would be the most loving thing we could do for them. And offering hope to others, when we personally have very little hope that they can change? That’s reality sometimes.

Yes, this is the rub. Our sinful depravity, the world, and Satan all fight to keep us from counseling like Jesus counseled. Whenever we would follow or imitate Christ in any way, we find that our flesh is ever present, and we end up living in the land of good intentions. We all too often choose the path of least resistance. As a result, we don’t begin like Jesus, prioritize like Jesus, fish like Jesus, or care like Jesus just because it seems too hard. We need something more than commands, something more than even

Jesus' example. We need motivation and empowerment! We need an encounter with big present-day Savior! We need to hear the music of the gospel, to learn to preach it to ourselves, and have it stir our hearts with a radical gratitude.

Several years ago I was invited by a high school classmate named Charlie Phillips to do something called "Walk to Emmaus." Charlie had actually invited me several times before to do this, saying that it had changed his life and that I should give it a try. He finally wore me down, and I agreed to do it. It was held during a weekend down the road in Ogden, and to be honest with you, I wanted to go home after just two hours on Friday night. But I repented of my judgmental attitude, and by Saturday morning things were much better. On Saturday night there was a banquet that was prepared in Jesus' honor, and we were to walk downstairs to the banquet with the person who had invited us. I watched the other 30+ men in the group be escorted down to the dining room. I was the last person in the room, and when my name was called, I walked into the hallway, expecting to see some local alumni who would walk me down. But there stood Charlie Phillips! Charlie had flown all the way from Dallas Texas to Des Moines, Iowa, then rented a car to drive to Ogden. Just to walk me down the stairs. I will never forget sitting down for the banquet in Jesus' honor, tears streaming down my face, realizing that this is how Jesus loved *me*. Not just as part of a group plan, "for God so loved the world", but also me individually. As Paul said in Galatians 2:20: "the son of God, who loved *me* and gave himself for *me*." I had been giving myself in ministry to others, telling them about God's love for them, and had forgotten about his love for me. This encounter with Jesus continues to minister to me powerfully, as I daily need to be reminded of God's love for me. Nothing motivates me more.

This morning I have encouraged you to counsel like Jesus counseled. Imagine the impact this could make on your family tree if you and your children learned how to care even better for one another's hearts! Envision the ripple effect that could take place if our 50 Connection Groups applied soul care not only in their host homes, but in the Atrium each Sunday! What if Upward Coaches encouraged and dispensed hope year round to hurting Upward players and families.

But let's not simply attempt to muster up a little more willpower to do yet one more Christian thing. Let Jesus' individual and costly love for you—yes you, motivate you to give away your life for the sake of others.

¹ Garrett Higbee, *Biblical Soul Care for the Local Church, Session 2:1*

² Job 2:11-13

³ Mark 5:25-34

⁴ Rebecca Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World, p. 54*

⁵ Higbee, *Session 17:2*

⁶ *Ibid*, *Session 5:1*

⁷ Jeff Meyers, *Handoff, p. 130*

⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:7

⁹ Matthew 7:1-5

¹⁰ Brent Aucion, *Faith Biblical Counseling, Foundations p. 17*