

# What I've Sharpened or Changed

## After 30 Years of Counseling

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### I. Don't Keep Going If You Don't Have a Counselee!

- I learned this the hard way after a string of failed counseling cases, where I was beating myself up, saying, "What am I doing wrong???" Wow. I used to be able to help people."

But then I had a string of hard but wonderful cases, where I had a front-row seat to see God breakthrough and do an amazing work. So, as I reflected on what made the difference, I realized, "I have counselees now!"

- They want to be in counseling
  - They're teachable
  - They're willing to put forth effort and work hard
  - They faithfully keep our appointments and do the homework I've assigned
  - They ask good questions
  - They express gratitude for the time I'm spending with them
- The Bible talks about how important it is to understand who it is you have sitting in front of you.
    - Do they just want to play the "Blame Game?"
    - Are they just focused on proving who's most wrong?
    - Do they just fight in front of you each week or spend the session telling you how bad it is and what so-and-so did this week?
    - Do they just want to be able to say, "Oh, we even did biblical counseling and it didn't work."
    - Do they keep saying, "I can't" or do they say, "Wow. This is hard, but..."
  - Are you trying to counsel a fool? A scoffer? Or a mocker?

**Proverbs 9:7-8** "Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still..."

**Proverbs 15:2** "A scoffer does not love one who reproves him, he will not go to the wise."

- Pray that God would show you who you have sitting in front of you because God hasn't called us to approach every person in the same way.

**I Thessalonians 5:14** "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all."

Are they...

- Unruly?
  - Fainthearted?
  - Weak?
- Unruly – Greek word ‘Atakteo’ – that means disorderly, undisciplined, out of line, and unwilling to submit to the instruction or guidance of someone else. It’s a military term, as well as a description of someone who tries to evade obligation or any sense of personal responsibility.
  - This is the person you should lovingly warn or rebuke and then stop counseling if they don’t change their attitude and response to counseling.

## II. Don’t Just Plow Ahead in the Face of Set-Backs

- Pay attention to their body language and “Halo Data” as they settle into the session.
- If it doesn’t look good, ask “So, how are you doing since we met last week?”
- Don’t just let them rehash it front of you. Ask clarifying questions and walk them back through it, turning it into a “Teaching Moment,” by helping them each to:
  - See how they each contributed to the problem.
  - See what they could do differently next time.
  - See how something we’ve already covered should have been applied to this situation.

## III. Keep Bringing It Back to Love!

### I Corinthians 13:1-13

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful (*NIV* ‘keeps no record of wrongs’ *NASB* ‘does not take into account a wrong suffered’ *Message* ‘doesn’t keep score of the sin of others’); <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup> Love never ends... <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

<sup>13</sup> So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

- Love God
- Love others
- Live for something / someone bigger than yourself

**2 Corinthians 5:14-15** “<sup>14</sup> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”

#### **IV. Don't Just Correct – But Connect with Where They Are**

- Affirm and connect with what you've got in order to move them to a new place.
- Don't dismiss or despise.
- Use it to affirm and build on.
- **i.e.** Recent case where the husband kept spouting off what sounded like spiritual platitudes... it just rubbed me the wrong way. He seemed self-righteous and hyper-spiritual, and I allowed my emotions and flesh to quickly dislike him and even despise him or look down on him.
  - “We're not glorifying God or pleasing God in our marriage”
  - “We're not being doers of the Word.”
  - “We're not walking in the Spirit.”
- Each time he said something like this I pushed back in a dismissive way, indicating I really didn't want to hear it from him, almost like he didn't have the “right” to talk that way until I felt like he was practically doing more of what he was talking about. I was put off by how much his lips didn't match his life.
- But God's Spirit convicted me and I asked God to change my heart towards him and instead began to remind him of these things, and express gratitude that he came in already wanting to do things that I normally have to teach or bring up to the counselee.
- The “mood” in our sessions, and the responsiveness of my counselee to things I was trying to get him to do was dramatically different — much more hopeful and encouraging.

#### **V. Don't Wait 'Til the End to Celebrate**

- Help them to see and celebrate grace and growth in the midst of mess.
- Make it your goal to point out and talk about any “evidence of grace” and growth

- **i.e.** Bible reading (asked for 5 days... they did 2)
- **i.e.** Big fight, but to side of the road, prayed, used “Floor Tile” to discuss it. Had a great road trip together the next day.
- **i.e.** Husband spoke sharply to his wife on Sunday AM, “Why aren’t you in the car already?” When she expressed how this hurt her feelings he said, “I would want to know this. Please tell me when I do something like this.” It wasn’t good that it happened but his invitation to tell him about it was a huge new place for them to be in their relationship.

## VI. Don’t Ever Assume Anything about Anyone at Any Time!

- Keep developing your ability to ask your way towards something you want to say. It will take longer, but will produce much better fruit!
- Keep working hard to avoid “**Assumicide**” like the plague!
- Robert Jones has an excellent article titled, “**You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know**” (March 5, 2018, BCC blog). He talks about three things that can be helpful in counseling but can also cause you to make the mistake of assuming something:
  - #1 Your personal Experience
  - #2 Your observations and training
  - #3 Your previous counseling
- I still regularly catch myself about to make a statement, but instead I’ll say, “Wait a minute... let me ask you...”

**Paul Tripp’s** book, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, Chapter 9, “Getting to Know People,” is a great chapter on how to avoid ASSUMPTION by asking good QUESTIONS.

## VII. Don’t Decide for Yourself What You Think God Has Done – Ask Them!

- Get them to clarify and be more aware of what God’s doing in the process.
- At a midpoint (for me 8-10 sessions), hit pause and get them to “summarize” where they are and what God has taught them so far.
- New worksheet I created that I called “**Capturing What God is Teaching Me**”
  - **Processing Life:**  
Why do I do what I do? How am I responding to my present circumstances?

- **Needed Perspective:**

How can I see things from someone else's vantage point? In what ways do I need a reality check? What specific biblical truths are most relevant to my struggle?

- **Practicalities:**

What are meaningful, realistic, and specific actions I need to take? (Think back to the homework or action steps the counselor has given you) Why should I do these things? (To curb legalism, you must remember *why* you're doing what you're doing)

- This can help them solidify what's been done, as well as determine what should be done next

- What do you think we haven't discussed that would be helpful to you now?

<p>“Reading makes a full man, conversation a ready man, and writing an exact man.”</p>
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~Francis Bacon

In biblical counseling, we make good use of all three – reading, conversation, and writing.

### VIII. Don't Teach Commands without Giving the Greater Context

- Use the bigger context of Scripture as often as possible.
- I use **Eph. 5-6** for marriage instead of just **Eph. 5:22-32**.

You'll see that we really don't have what it takes to do marriage, but we do have everything necessary to destroy one!

That's why this marriage passage is surrounded by some other critical information.

**5:18** – Be filled with the Spirit “... be filled with the Spirit”

**5:20** – Be thankful “... giving thanks”

**5:21** – Be ready to lay down your “rights” “... submitting to one another”

**6:12** – Be alert to who the real enemy is that wants to destroy your marriage – Satan

**6:13** – Be armed for spiritual battle “Therefore take up the whole armor of God...”

**6:16** – Be full of faith “Above all, taking the shield of faith”

**6:18** – Be praying constantly “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit”

## IX. Frame It Up Around Jesus as Much as Possible!

David Powlison writes...

“Where the Lord calls for change, connect those specific changes to what God is doing. Whenever you need to change, put the Redeemer in the center of the picture... Don't ever degenerate into giving advice unconnected to the good news of Jesus crucified, alive, present, at work, and returning.”

Ephesians gives us no Reader's Digest list of ‘six principles for successful marital conversation’ or ‘four keys to getting your life organized.’ Such advice is often reasonably OK, though rather pale and powerless.” *Seeing With New Eyes*, David Powlison, page 43

Paul Tripp explains it this way when he says...

“We approach the Bible with a ‘where can I find a verse on \_\_\_\_\_’ mentality. We forget that the only hope the principles offer rests on the Person, Jesus Christ... We cannot treat the Bible as a collection of therapeutic insights. To do so distorts its message and will not lead to lasting change. If a system could give us what we need, Jesus would never have come... He is the only answer, so we must never offer a message that is less than the good news. We don't offer people a system; we point them to a Redeemer.” *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, Paul David Tripp, P. 8 & 9

**Phil. 2:3-8** has become my go-to marriage passage even though the word ‘Marriage’ is nowhere in it!

**Philippians 2:3-8** “<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

- You’ll see what really DESTROYS marriage – self / selfishness
- You’ll see Paul’s commands FRAMED around Jesus!
- Humility | Other’s focused | like Jesus!

## X. Don’t Talk about “Fruit” Sins without Digging into “Root” Sins

Spend more time identifying both sinful behavior *and* sinful/idolatrous motives (heart issues)

- I do a “**Log List**” to zero in on specific sins rather than leaving it general and fuzzy.
  - What specific actions need to be changed or repented of?

- I dig below the surface to help them **identify why** they do what they do, and why it's so hard to stop or change
  - Why do you do what you do? What are you really wanting? What do you really live for? What do you really worship and build your life and world around?
  - Human beings have worshipped their way into every sinful mess they've ever landed in!

## **XI. Don't Let It Turn into a Bible Study – Push for Specific and Practical Change**

- Walk through the “Log list” Exercise
- Do “Couch Time” this week
- Pray together 1x this week (Husband – you lead out on this)
- Do 3 loving deeds
- Plan a “Date Nite”
- Use the “Floor Tile” to discuss a contentious issue
- Use a “Catch Yourself” Card. Come back with 3 examples.

## **XII. Don't Talk about Change without Talking about the Holy Spirit**

- Don't just talk about “Put Off” and “Put On” in **Ephesians 4:22-24**
- Talk about the Holy Spirit and explain more clearly how we actually change and why it's so hard

**You Are Free!**  
**Galatians 5:13-25**

**You are FREE**  
to please  
God, but still  
have  
disordered  
desires (flesh)

**Galatians 5:13** “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”



**When you GIVE IN**  
to these desires, you  
**ABUSE** your freedom



**When you abuse**  
**your freedom**, you  
**NEGATE** the law of  
**LOVE!**

**Galatians 5:14** “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”



When you negate  
love, you displease  
God and **DESTROY**  
**or DEVOUR other**  
**people** created in the  
image of God

**Galatians 5:15** “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”



## **You Are Free But You Are Conflicted**

**Galatians 5:17** “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

**Romans 7:18** “... For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”

## **So, You Must Be Filled with the Spirit**

**Ephesians 5:18** “And do not get drunk with wine... but be filled with the Spirit”

## **And You Must Live and Fight Your Own Flesh by the Spirit**

**Galatians 5:16** Walk by Spirit

**Galatians 5:18** Be led by Spirit

**Galatians 5:25** Live by Spirit... Keep in STEP with Spirit

**Romans 8:3-4** Do not live according to the flesh... but Spirit

**Romans 8:5-7** 5x uses “mind” set on Spirit instead of flesh

**Romans 8:13** You by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the flesh