

What is Biblical Counselling?

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Date: 22 January 2025

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[0 : 0 0] All right. Okay, let's pray. Lord, we thank you for gathering us as your people, and we just ask now that you would help us to be counselors, counselors to one another, to receive counseling as well, that you would give us the humility to know how much we need it and give us the love to give it. And so we pray that in Christ's name. Amen. So counseling and psychotherapy, everybody in here will know, counseling and psychotherapy are far more popular than they've ever been.

So people are going for counseling, going for psychotherapy far more today in January 2025 than ever before in human history. And professional counseling is such a gift and a good quite often.

And so we need trained practitioners who are capable of evaluating and diagnosing and prescribing care to the mental and corroborated physical problems that we have that lead to mental health issues and behavioral issues, right? So these things are really good. We need this. Biblical counseling is a discipline, is a practice that is in no way opposed to professional counseling or professional psychotherapy, not at all. But biblical counseling is a Christian idea that really emphasizes the role of counseling and discipleship. So it's just an aspect of our discipleship. And it's an aspect of discipleship that's trying to hone in on the normalness of counseling in everyday ordinary life amongst Christians that we already do. And so biblical counseling in its oldest form is just a more concrete and more organized way of talking about a mom and her daughter's relationship, a sister and a sister, a dad and a son, a friend and a friend, right? We all have relationships of different kinds, siblings, family members, friendships, and we all do something like counseling with each other. And so all we're talking about in this series is not, will you go and be a counselor? But because you are one, are you doing it well? Are you doing it and bringing at times foolish counsel, harmful counsel to people? So the Bible assumes that if you're a Christian, especially, but humans, period, by way of our basic anthropology of what we are, we are counselors. We have to be, right? We are giving counsel all the time. And so the question here is how are we doing with it?

And so one of the things to say is like evangelism, counseling needs to be deprofessionalized, not exclusively deprofessionalized, but we need to acknowledge the normalness of it in everyday life more and more. And we need to really focus on that. So in the first, in your handout, the very first passage, Ephesians 4, 11 to 12, just to highlight this, so Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors, the teachers. So he lists these offices that Jesus, these gifts that Jesus gives the church. So there are in the church, talked about this with our cohort group last night, there are people who are particularly gifted by the Holy Spirit to be evangelists and should be. And then in addition to that, what's the very next verse?

The very next verse says in verse 12 that he did that, he gives these gifts to equip everybody to do it too. And so in the same way, the deprofessionalization of evangelism, there need to be professional evangelists, career evangelists, so that they can help everybody evangelize.

[3 : 51] There need to be professional counselors and professional biblical counselors so that they can help everybody with counseling because we all have to do it and we all need to be doing it in our daily lives. So Richard Baxter, he's a 17th century Puritan, English Puritan pastor, very famous pastor in the 1600s. And he said, counseling is for resolving our doubts, for help against our sins, for direction in our duties, and for an increase in the knowledge of saving grace.

So he said, counseling is just the normal kind of whoop and woof of everyday relationships between Christians. It should be the norm for our Christian relationships. And so, you know, when somebody in your life helps remind you that you are saved by grace, not your performance, that is Christian counseling. When somebody in your life helps you move from doubt about the existence of God to a measure of certainty, that is Christian counseling. When somebody in your life wants to help you work on your anxiety through the lens of the gospel, that is biblical or Christian counseling. So that's the kind of stuff we're talking about. So we'll get more specific than that, but another word to use in the place of counseling is just pastoral care. That's been a more consistent word in our tradition that we've used, pastoral care. So let me ask you, as we get started on this and look at it in some detail, are we, are you, are we actively looking in love to care for the people in our lives that God has given us? Are you, are we actively, consciously looking in love and humility to care for the people God has put in our lives through counseling them? The tight-knit, close relationships, are they underdeveloped?

Have you really dove in on the relationships God has potentially given you that are tight and close-knit between Christians to develop that relationship into what the Bible calls it to be, which is a relationship of deep counseling with one another, walking with one another. So that, that's what we're working on. Now, personal testimony story. When I finished seminary, I, maybe, maybe this will be a surprise to you, but I, I was excited. I could get excited about theology. I could get excited about biblical exegesis, drawing meaning out of passages. I could get excited about reading about Greco-Roman contexts, and I could get excited about all these sorts of things. But then when I went to the first ministerial job I had to do, I realized that about 70 percent was counseling. And I quickly realized that I had no clue what to say to anybody about anything. I could talk to them about the Greco-Roman context of Matthew, but I, I struggled to know what to say when things got hard and heavy.

And of course, that's still the case to some degree. We all have that, right, to some degree. But I realized that my seminary experience did not prepare me for that side of ministry at all. Not really. We had about a half semester on it. And that still happens to all of us. But that's what we're trying to do is actually say that, who's had that experience, right, where you don't know what to say, and you really struggle, and you feel like, man, I should be loving them a lot better in this, and I don't know what to do. I'm timid. I'm afraid, right? And so that's what we're thinking about.

Another way to say it is what we're talking about in here is the slow, slow form of, of seeking deep change in our lives. So this is not just something directed at other people, but biblical counseling and thinking about it is a way to look at yourself and to evaluate yourself and to think about who you are in the light of who God's made you to be. And so we're talking about the dynamics of change, the dynamics of change, practicing the Christian life, dynamics of change. All of these things fit together. So what is biblical counseling? Let's dive into it a little bit. David Powlison is one of the kind of grandfathers of thinking about these things, and one of the ways he talks about it is he says to really get into biblical counseling, you've got to start by thinking of who you will become one day.

[8 : 02] So who will you become in the end? And he asked the question, what is our destination? What is the destination of the self, the soul, the personality, who you one day will become? And one of the ways he talks about that is to look at the Lord's prayer, and at the very end Jesus says, he tells us to pray, Lord deliver us from evil. And that's the way about thinking about destination.

One day we will be delivered from all evil. That's who we're going to become, delivered from evil. What does that look like? It means you will be first alive, not dead. You will be strong, not weak.

You will be physically exactly who you should be, whatever that means. That's hard to know. You will be liberated from fear, right? Can you imagine? Liberated from all fearfulness.

Liberated from all sorrow. That's who you'll become one day. You will be joyful, happy, and good. And I mean good, not in the sense of you'll be, you know, the goody two-shoes behavior police.

No, you'll be truly good, the way that the Old Testament talks about God, slow to anger, abounding in love, right? Patient, kind, gentle, good. Exactly the way you should be.

[9 : 26] And then David Palastro says, now, now you've got to ask, where am I today? And how big is the gap? Right? So when you do an exercise like that, it can be incredibly discouraging.

One of the ways to think about it is, do you ever, he brings up this illustration, but he's, do you ever find in any moment where you think, I'm happy right now?

Like, I'm having a good day, I'm happy, and your next instinct to say, wait a minute, like, what's wrong? You know, you're immediately searching, there's got to be something wrong.

Like, there's got to be a problem I need to be worried about right now, right? So I have a habit, I don't know about you, of thinking in the moments where I experience joy, immediately searching for the thing I need to be worried about, right?

Can you imagine being beyond something like that? No fearfulness. And we've got miles and miles to go, we've got a big road to traverse. And that could be incredibly discouraging, but when it comes to biblical counseling, the first bit of counseling we need is to say, when you take, when you do, this is, one theologian I like calls this God's mathematics.

[10 : 42] And if you take who you are today, sorry, who you will be, and you subtract it by who you are today, what does that equal? What is the gap? You know, what is the equation come out to?

And you could say, a whole lot of behavior change, a whole lot of performance. And the actual answer is that Jesus Christ's transformative glory is what it equals.

That's the gap. The difference in who you are right now and who you will be one day is the difference. The difference, where is it going to be made up? It's going to be made up in Jesus Christ giving you his transformative glory.

Glorification. It's God that's going to do it. He's going to get you all the way there. So you're not going to make it there. By the time you die, you are not going to cross that desert that you have left across, right?

But Jesus will bring you all the way, right? But until then, biblical counseling is trying to say, how do we pursue holiness and happiness and help one another in that until we arrive at the final destination?

[11 : 45] Okay, so we're focused here on the estrangement, you might say, between the future self and the current self. There's an estrangement. And we're thinking about that and reflecting on that.

But what biblical counseling does that's different is it says that's a collective work. So we can think about that individually, but the Bible says, no, it's a we.

It's an us. And so biblical counseling is saying that we are here to help each other do that in tight, close-knit personal relationships. Now, that doesn't mean that everybody in this room will be really sharing the depths of the soul with everybody in this room, not at all.

But it does mean that within the Christian community, either within this local church community or somebody else outside of it that you know that's a Christian, we ought to have counseling relationships with other Christians, where we're receiving and giving, receiving and giving.

Some of us have those pretty naturally inbuilt in our current relationships, but sometimes the most important thing is friendship, friendship, where we're receiving and giving these types of things. So, Pallison quotes John Calvin about this, and Calvin here talks about this gap between the future self and the current self.

[13 : 01] And this is what he says, No one has sufficient enough strength to press on with the due eagerness that is required. And weakness so weighs us down that with wavering and limping and most of the time creeping along the ground, we move at a very feeble rate of change.

No one shall set out so inauspiciously as not daily to make some headway, though it be the tiniest, the slightest. Then let us not despair at the slightness of success.

So he says, It is the normal pattern of Christians, including John Calvin himself, to do nothing more in this life than make the tiniest little creeps along the way of that change. And he says, But if there is any headway at all, let us not despair.

If there is the tiniest step that you've taken from being a person that struggles with rage to being more slow to anger than you used to be, he says, The tiniest creep, let us not despair.

Jesus Christ's glory will cross the rest of the distance. He will bring us the rest of the way. And so, counseling is trying to help us in this life pursue as much of that creep, that crawl, if you will, as we possibly can.

[14 : 19] All right, so I'm just going to run through as much of this as we can, fill our times up, and then we'll pick back up next week where I'll leave off. So, foundations. 2 Peter 1.3 says, This is the second text on your handout.

Here's some foundations for biblical counseling. God's divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life. Through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

Now, focus on that first few words. His divine power has given us everything we need. The gospel and the presence of the Holy Spirit, the inscripturated revelation of God, the Bible, read through the power of the Spirit, has given us right now everything we need.

Everything we need to take this journey. Everything we need to counsel one another. Now, God's revelation, his divine power, where is that? It's in any place where God reveals himself.

And so, we've got to say with that, everything we need is broad because his power, his revelation is broad. So, that includes God's work of revealing his common grace gifts to people.

[15 : 30] So, where can you find God's revelation of wisdom in this world? Well, anywhere there's truth. All truth is God's truth.

And so, by God's common grace, sometimes you do go to a professional and they help you immensely. And the reason that they are able to do that is because God has revealed himself. That's what he's saying.

All divine power, all truth, all wisdom in this world comes from God's revelation. Even if it's used by somebody who doesn't believe in God. Common grace. But especially here, he's saying by special grace, by scripture and by wisdom, we have, by the presence of the Spirit, everything we need to help each other along this path.

All the resources. So, because God has spoken, we can do this. By the power of looking at God's revelation, his word. We can counsel. We can learn how to do it. We can help each other.

Really, deeply, deeply help each other. So, Calvin says at the beginning of the Institutes, to know God, you've got to know yourself. And to know yourself, you've got to look at God.

[16 : 38] And he says, you've got to live in that reciprocal loop. Where if you really want to know who you are, you've got to stare at what God says about himself. And when that happens, you realize you're lack.

But then, to really know God, you've got to look at who you are and think, I'm a creature, but God must be the creator. I'm dependent. God must be independent. He talks about this reciprocal loop of doing theology.

By knowing yourself, then knowing God. Knowing God, then in order to know yourself back and forth, back and forth. And one of the things that biblical counseling does is says, you've got to be willing to plumb the depths of your desires, plumb the depths of the reality of what's going on in your soul.

Have you ever, I've mentioned it a couple times here, but ever taken the exercise off of actually working out on paper your idols, your specific idols, and listing them, and asking the question underneath the question?

Like, if this is the thing I think I love, is there something even underneath that that's driving me? So this is what Calvin means. That is biblical counseling. It's the work of unpacking the depths of your consciousness, unpacking the depths of your soul in order to grow.

[17 : 48] And so here's a definition. This is a simple definition that I like of biblical counseling. It's simply this, it's discipleship toward who we are meant to be that addresses specific issues we struggle with, with an emphasis on Christian friendship.

So biblical counseling is just the path of discipleship, focusing on the deep issues that we struggle with, with a big emphasis on friendship with somebody, walking through that together.

That's the idea. All right, so I think that when you look at the Bible and you see how the Bible addresses so many issues, like in December we looked at anxiety, we looked at sadness and loneliness, things like that, you realize that what God is doing in His Word is telling us, I expect that it's going to be normal that most of the time, most of the counseling that happens in our lives is just through normal relationships, not through professionals.

So again, we need that quite often. But the Bible itself even just gives you a book like Proverbs, which is written mostly for parents of how to train up your kids.

And that's counseling. That's wisdom. That's imparting wisdom to people. And so the Bible is bent this way. Most counseling will not come from professionals, 99% of it in our normal lives.

[19 : 09] Most of it will be just between one another, between our friends. So the next text, Proverbs 27, 17, as iron sharpens iron, so one person, one man, one woman sharpens the other.

So do you have a Proverbs 27, 17 relationship where somebody in your life is closely walking with you to sharpen you and to talk about your idols and to talk about your struggles?

Do you have that relationship? The Bible is very clear about that. It's very clear about calling us to this type of counseling relationship. And so where are we getting this kind of stuff? You know, obviously, the pastorate exists for that.

Absolutely. But we also know that that's also never going to be the main counseling relationship for 99% of people, right? It can't be. It's got to be far broader than that.

And so we get this in all sorts of relationships in our lives. Okay, the last thing, and we'll move to this chart. That's this. While professional counseling, practices of psychotherapy, behavioral analysis and treatment can be really, really helpful for us, one of the things to just say about this is that the goal of biblical counseling will always be different from contemporary psychotherapy because the goal of biblical counseling is worship.

[20 : 33] The goal of biblical counseling is to help one another worship. So whereas contemporary counseling often focuses on you, biblical counseling focuses on you, but in order to get you out of yourself, in order to bring you to a place of worship, of getting out of your own head.

So self-forgetfulness is the big goal in Christian counseling, biblical counseling. That's always going to be distinct from contemporary psychotherapy, professional counseling in the contemporary world.

All right, so I just want to get right into it and give you a quick paradigm for how to do it, a way to think about it as we close today, and then we'll get into more detail in a couple weeks, more and more detail.

So, but I think I came across this article called, it's in the footnote there in your handout, The Connection Between Everyday Ministry and Counseling by Todd Strive.

And it's a fantastic prime, quick entryway into thinking about this and reflecting on these practices and how simple they are. But you can see this pyramid there. The broad base of the pyramid is love and humility, right?

[21 : 45] So he's reflecting there on the base posture that we all need to seek as counselors of one another, love and humility.

So you can go to a place like Philippians 2, the hymn of Christ, where it says, Christ came for us in humility, the cross uttered humility, and so put on humility.

Follow him in that, gospel-centered. And love and humility become the base ethic for all counseling. So what is love? Love, what is love? Very difficult to define sometimes.

Love is a desire for another person's good. That's basic love. Love is just to desire another person's good. What is humility?

Humility is the ability to forget yourself so that you can desire another person's good. Right, so another way, there's a modern thinker, not a Christian, but he has a conversational paradigm that I think maps really well into biblical counseling, and it's called VIEW.

[22 : 51] It's V-I-E-W. And VIEW is that in counseling, you walk in, in Christian friendship, you walk into the relationship with V, vulnerability, willingness to be known because you're self-forgetful.

I, impartiality, what's that? That's the humility to seek the best for the person without any sense of favoring your position.

So impartiality says, I will try to judge this situation without any reference to my good. Right, impartiality. E, empathy or compassion.

I want to try to think about what they're struggling with through the lens of their perspective. And W, wonder, curiosity. I want to engage with them by being as curious as possible, which draws me to ask more and more questions and really get into their life and try to understand it better.

So that's one way. I think that maps really well to the basics of biblical counseling view, entering every relationship because of the gospel with vulnerability, impartiality, empathy, and wonder, curiosity.

[23 : 57] Now, I'm not going to name names, but I want to ask you to think about this for a moment. Can you name somebody in your mind, not out loud right now, that you think, man, there is a person in my life that models this that is, without knowing it, such a counselor and puts on this Christian ethic so well with vulnerability, empathy, sorry, impartiality, empathy, and wonder, curiosity every time I talk to them.

Right, so I can think of two people in our church community that jump out to me over the top good at this. And what we're seeing here in this pyramid scheme is that that's because, that will be because they are humble.

That will be the primary reason. They have put on the humility of Jesus Christ, will be the cause of that, that they're actually really deeply interested in everything we say. They want to know more.

They want to ask questions. They want to be impartial in their advice. There's no hierarchy in the conversation. There's no sense of me trying to make sure you know that, or any of us know that I'm slightly better than you at this, or whatever, right?

That's a lack of impartiality. That's a hierarchical position in a conversation, right? So this is the basic idea. So, a couple, two minutes left, so let me just give you the first couple.

[25 : 18] Here's how simple the Bible works this into our lives. We'll just do the ones on the first page. Seven biblical applications. The way this works is with the basis of gospel-centered love and humility being totally for other people, that moves into the normal pattern of your everyday life, which is everyday ministry.

Everyday ministry. Everybody's a minister. Every conversation. You're a minister. You're on ministry. In every conversation, there's never time off of that. Being a Christian, putting on the love and humility of Christ.

And then sometimes, that develops. You see that inverted pyramid into counseling, right? So, you take love and humility, the view paradigm, into every conversation, but then, in some of those conversations, it will be counseling when it becomes deep friendship, when it becomes personal relationship.

That's the paradigm here. So, James 1.19. Here's one. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. Okay, so how do you pull this into everyday ministry?

How do you pull this into counseling in a specific relationship? Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. And I've put a little blank there to just give a couple words that you can kind of hold on to.

[26 : 39] And the words for that one are poise and patience. So, a biblical counselor is working on poise and patience based on James 1.19.

What does that look like? Poise. It looks like this. In a conversation, my words are guarded and careful. I have poise. So, because of the gospel, I want to make sure that I'm intentional with every word I speak.

That's poise. I want to guard my words. Love, seeking that person's best in front of me means guarding what I say and being careful, thinking a certain way of putting that could be very discouraging.

Right? That's poise. One example of poise. Another example of poise, I'm guarded against hasty conclusions, against quick judgments.

So, I'm not walking into this conversation thinking, I already know what your problem is. Right? I want to actually give them myself and my time to listen. That's poise. That's James 1.19.

[27 : 48] Poise and patience. And so, what would patience look like in a counseling relationship with a dear Christian friend? It would look like the work of responsive listening. So, impartiality includes responsive listening where you're really deeply listening and maybe you're rehashing what they said to you in different words to try to say, okay, am I understanding it clearly?

Responsive listening probes with questions. So, one way you can judge yourself, you can evaluate yourself. Judge not, right?

Evaluate yourself on where you are in a conversation with love and humility because of the gospel is ask yourself, do I tend to ask other people way more questions than they ask me?

That's one of the things I think you have to look for. Are you a person who is constantly asking questions of the person across from you? You know, if you're doing that, you're getting out of yourself and active listening, right?

Active listening. You've got poise and patience. All right, I'll just do one more. We'll leave the next five for next time. Ephesians 4.32. All right, so look how simple is that? Be quick to listen.

[29 : 01] Slow to anger. Slow to become angry. Just a listener. That's a biblical counselor. Responsive listening. Secondly, Ephesians 4.32, be kind and compassionate to one another.

So we don't have to come up with any other words. Kind and compassionate. That's the next characteristic of somebody putting on the gospel and trying to be a counselor to people. So what does that look like?

It's a posture that values the person in front of you so much because they are first made in God's image. So compassion and empathy first are grounded in the fact that no matter what this person has done or not done.

I know at least they're made in God's image. And so they've got value. They've got value no matter who they are, no matter what they've done. Right? And then from there, you can put away, well, it's just the I.

It's impartiality. It's impartiality and empathy. See, impartiality is based on compassion. It's based on compassion. It says, I really do want the best for them. I really do, I really do want good for them.

[30 : 04] That is Christ's compassion. So when he looks over Jerusalem and he weeps in compassion for her, it's because he wants her, that great city, to get the very best, right, which is himself.

And they've rejected that. And so that's compassion. So how does it, what does that look like in counseling? One of the ways that's pointed out quite often in biblical counseling on this is that kindness and compassion is often expressed in counseling situation by trying to be as aware as possible of the extent of somebody's pain.

So trying to be very aware and not dismissive of the lack of experience you may have in whatever this person has been through and trying to really connect and think, boy, what kind of pain must they be experiencing?

That's compassion. It's saying, I want to know something of the depth of the pain that they've walked through. All right, I want to permit me to do one more because I wanted to get to this one and we'll stop.

Truly. 1 Corinthians 9.22, last one. Paul says, here's a flip in the script. Be slow to speak, quick to listen.

[31 : 16] Be compassionate. Third, Paul says, to the weak I became weak to win the weak, I've become all things to all people so that I might save some.

There's an important work in Christian counseling like in evangelism of sacrifice and accommodation. Sacrifice and accommodation. So this is, boy, this is humility applied in your life.

Sacrifice and accommodation. It says, to help somebody else flourish to the max, maybe to get the gospel to them in evangelism, I want to accommodate to where this person is.

I don't, in other words, I don't expect non-Christians to act like they're Christians. I want to go to where they are and meet them where they are.

Right? That would be one way in an evangelistic context. In a counseling context, well, think about it. You don't talk to a child like they're an adult. Right? You've got, we've got to accommodate and sacrifice ourselves and step towards the person wherever they might be so that they can come as they are and receive the word of the Bible, the counseling that the Bible offers them.

[32 : 28] Right? So I heard from one very wise person last night in my evangelism cohort where they said it's very important in evangelism to love people exactly where they are, not where you expect them to be.

Right? And so sometimes accommodation and counseling means killing your cultural loves, your cultural vibes. You know, the things that you really expect to be the case and want to be the case and think only a decent person would only do this.

You've got to kill that actually in order to meet them where they are to bring them not into the culture we expect to exist but into the way the Bible wants them to walk.

Love and humility based on Christ. Right? So love, accommodation, sacrifice has to be made. Sacrifice. All right. We've got to kill our expectations. That's love and humility for people. All right.

Let me stop and I'll pray. Lord, we just ask now that as a community, as a community, you would give us, you would give us deeper love for one another, deeper love because of the love we've experienced in the cross.

[33 : 33] So, I think tonight, Lord, our prayer is would you help us to meditate on the cross so that we can then turn horizontally and love one another, really seek each other's good with deep humility.

humility. So that's the prayer. Make us into counselors. We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.