

LESSON ESSENTIALS

PASTORAL BASICS

LESSON 3: THE PASTOR AS COUNSELLOR

Whether in times of preparation or times of crisis, the counsel of a loving pastor will make a great difference in the life of the church. How can the pastor ensure that his influence in these crucial times points the congregant away from himself and onto Christ?

Remembering the analogy of 'pastor as shepherd,' it is understood that a pastor must have compassion and care for his flock. This is most on display when the members of the church need a counsellor. With one pastor for many congregants, how can he be sure to not overextend himself?

First, remember that there are only so many hours available for pastoral work every week. Some of those must be taken up with preparing the sermon.

Do not rely upon your own wisdom. The surest way to reach burn out is by depending upon your own strength and knowledge as you counsel your congregants. You must pursue the Lord's wisdom for your people and be steadfastly seeking His will, not your own good ideas.

It is a great privilege to be a voice into the life of someone when they are going through a significant life event. Pastors often find themselves speaking into relationships during premarital counselling, or giving parenting instruction. Sometimes they find themselves being a source of wise counsel when large decisions are being made. Sadly, sometimes they need to be grief counsellors, walking their congregants through the valley of the shadow of death. Through joy and through hardship, the pastor as counsellor has a crucial role in the life of his church.

But with one pastor for many congregants, the work load – both physically and emotionally – can be too much to take on. The toll on the pastor's own emotional health can be high, and the cost to his family can be higher still if some boundaries are not put in place.

First, remember that there are only so many hours available for pastoral work every week. Some of those must be taken up with preparing the sermon. How many hours can be set aside for counselling? That will depend upon the church itself and may vary according to circumstantial needs. Obviously, if there was an emergency or a major crisis in the church, those counselling needs may take priority over most everything else for a time. But in the general day-to-day business of church life, pastors must carve firm boundaries for themselves so that they can get the rest they need and so that they are available for their family at home as well. Be very tenacious on your hold of these time boundaries. You want to be available to counsel your church for the long run, and if you burn out by over extending yourself physically or emotionally now, you will not be able to serve them well for as long as you might hope.

Additionally, do not rely upon your own wisdom. The surest way to reach burn out is by depending upon your own strength and knowledge as you counsel your congregants. You must pursue the Lord's wisdom for your people and be steadfastly seeking His will, not your own good ideas.

In light of that, another way to maintain appropriate boundaries for your counselling work is to be sure to point your congregants to Christ. Obviously, in a caring pastoral relationship, strong emotional ties will be made. People love people and it is easy to get attached to those who demonstrate care and concern for us. You must be very cautious that in all your counsel, you are pointing people back to Christ. It is His wisdom and His compassion that you are extending. He is their true help and 'wonderful counsellor' and you are merely His instrument. By directing the focus of your congregants rightly to the Lord, you will free yourself of much of the burden that you truly have no right of carrying.

Of course, along with this is the mandate to always keep relationships morally appropriate: do not allow yourself to get attached to them (or them to you) more than is appropriate. Too many emotionally-charged sessions with no boundaries can lead to immoral connections (emotional

or physical). Do keep your distance, and seek ways to build a hedge of protection around your heart and theirs.

Finally, remember that you cannot bear the weight of responsibility if your church member does not take your wise counsel or if their circumstance does not change. The Lord is sovereign over what happens in their lives and they are responsible for their own decisions. You cannot bear any guilt or shame for what the Lord is doing in their lives.

Counseling in the pastor's office can take many forms: advice, correction, encouragement, instruction, and more. Only by seeking the Lord's will and by pursuing godly discernment can a pastor know how to rightly counsel. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 speaks to different needs a church member might have and how you ought to respond. It reads, "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all." There will be times for admonishing, encouraging, and helping. Will you know when to counsel in each of these ways? Seek the Lord for His perspective and His compassion and trust Him to use you as a godly counsellor in the lives of the members of your church.

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1 Thessalonians 5:14

IN REVIEW

- Being available as counsellor to your church members is a great privilege and one to be taken on with joy.
- As there is only one of you to minister to your entire congregation, you must build some boundaries to protect your time, energy, family, emotional attachments, and moral reputation.
- The critical framework in all counselling is to point your congregant back to Christ as the ultimate help and counsellor, and to rely on the wisdom of the Word for your advice.

HAVE YOUR SAY

- Have you ever received counsel from a pastor? How did he approach the counselling? From a Biblical approach or more of a worldly framework? What worked or did not work for you? Consider how you might apply those discoveries to your own counselling ministry.

- How do you decide what type of counsel a member needs? Have you ever worried that you incorrectly counselled a member? Meditate on 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and ask the Lord to reveal His perspective so that you are rightly ministering to your church.

- If you have a family, sit down with them and ask them to honestly evaluate how much of your 'best' you are giving to the church and whether or not they feel like they are losing out. Together set some boundaries on your time and energy so that your family can support, and not resent, your counselling ministry.

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