

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership
Leader's Guide

PASTORAL BASICS

LESSON 3: THE PASTOR AS COUNSELOR

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Discipleship Essentials module titled Pastoral Basics. This module will be helpful for untrained leaders who are serving as pastors, for churches who are looking for a pastor, and for those pursuing a pastoral role. It will outline the many duties a pastor may have in a local church, and what church members should expect from their pastor. Some specific challenges are also included, such as ministry to different age groups as well as considerations for church growth.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for these lessons is Christians who are maturing in their faith and desiring to serve God sincerely. The lessons will also benefit church leaders who wish to encourage people in their Christian service, and identify spiritual gifts in those they are discipling.

The Leader's Guide is intended to help you as a leader in your preparation. These lesson outlines may be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials found online at www.discipleshipessentials.org.

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PASTORAL BASICS

LESSON 3: THE PASTOR AS COUNSELOR

PURPOSE

The pastor is involved in the lives of his people and is often called upon to counsel individuals in times of crisis, or to help them seek direction from God. This lesson focuses on the basics of Biblical counselling and its place in the ministry of a pastor.

LEADER'S NOTE

Our world has a mental health crisis. People suffer from depression, severe anxiety, and unhealthy thought patterns that destroy relationships and healthy living. Some communities acknowledge these mental health issues like they would any physical health concerns and others keep them hidden as shameful secrets. Pastoral counseling is far greater in scope than merely acknowledging the problems. Christians differ on the effectiveness of psychiatric medicine and therapeutic treatments. This lesson will take the view that mental health intervention from trained medical professionals may sometimes be necessary, but every issue for which a person seeks counseling has a spiritual cause that can be helped through wise handling of the Word of God. There are excellent resources that examine Biblical counseling on a deeper level, but this lesson will serve merely as an introduction.

INTRODUCTION

Select two or three of the following questions to ask the group.

- ❖ What is the best advice you have ever received from a pastor? What was the context in which it was given? Was it during a sermon, Bible study, or private conversation?
- ❖ For what decision in your life have you sought wise counsel? Who was available to help you? What decision have you made without wise counsel and later wished someone had helped you?
- ❖ Who do you talk to when you are unsure if you are making a wise choice? To whom do you go to keep you accountable for sin you are dealing with in your life? What is the benefit of having a person like this?
- ❖ For what problems might a person in your community seek the help of a trained counselor? Are such professionals available in your community? How can pastors and counselors work together for the benefit of those in their community?

STUDY



Instruct the group on the following points.

TEACH

- ❖ **Counselors and Shepherds:** Sheep are in danger of losing their way, and so are Christians even when they are part of a good church. We all face trials, and often need a pastor to lead, feed, protect, and comfort us through counseling. Counseling has the connotation of a response to a mental health crisis. However, all of us can benefit from the wise counsel of others, especially by someone who has been called and equipped by God to shepherd and care for His people. Counseling includes giving comfort and encouragement, general advice, pointing someone in the right direction, and helping to correct patterns of behaviour and thought. These are some reasons why all people may at times need someone to counsel them:
 - **People face problems:** We all face to some degree strained relationships, guilt, fears, anger, loss, grief or abuse. There are many types of problems, but one root cause: sin. Pastors can learn to identify sin and encourage repentance and forgiveness as necessary.
 - **Sin is powerful:** Counseling is necessary when a person is overtaken by sin and needs help to re-establish obedience to God. Sin is powerful and deceptive; as fellow believers, we can help to rescue one another when facing temptation.
 - **Life is difficult:** We all face many traumas and challenges to our faith. The death of a child, the betrayal of a spouse, the diagnoses of a terminal illness, the after effects of abuse or war, can challenge our perception of God and weaken our faith. Being lovingly cared for by the Church is one way God can bring about restoration, comfort and healing.
- ❖ **Qualified to Counsel:** Worldly response to a crisis is often to ignore the issue, or go to secular professionals for help (such as psychiatrists or psychotherapists). Pastors may wonder what qualifies them to offer counsel to people who are in distress. But pastors and all Christians have the resources they need when they counsel others: God's Word, the love of Christ, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
 - **Biblical mandate for counseling others:** The Bible gives clear direction that we should live in community with one another as believers and help one another. Consider what the Bible directs us to do:
 - **Carry each other's burdens:** ([Galatians 6:2](#))
 - **Encourage one another:** ([1 Thessalonians 5:11](#))
 - **Love one another:** ([John 13:34-35](#))
 - **Use the Word to teach, reprove, correct and train:** ([2 Timothy 3:16](#))
 - **Seek wisdom in order to instruct others:** ([Romans 15:4](#))
 - **Focus on attaining spiritual maturity:** ([Ephesians 4:13](#))
 - **Your qualification is Love:** When we obey God, love His people, pray, study His Word, and rely on Him for wisdom, the counsel we give can change the lives of people in our congregation. Biblical counseling does not require official secular training, though this



may be helpful. However, we must have a passion to help people experience God's healing in their lives.

- ❖ **Foundations of Biblical Counseling:** The term Biblical Counseling is the phrase used to describe the application of Biblical wisdom in a counseling situation. Biblical counseling is different from secular counseling, where people may seek solutions that are not Biblical. At its foundation, Biblical counseling recognizes sin as the basic problem and Jesus Christ as the solution, and it takes work, time, and the help of community. The Bible tells us that *"the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart"* (Hebrews 4:12). The Word itself can show us our sin, show us the true intentions of our heart, and help us to correct them. A counseling pastor can help guide people in the right direction.

➤ **The Goals of Biblical Counseling:**

- to develop a Biblical view of life, including sin, salvation, God and ourselves
- to name issues in Biblical terms and seek Biblical solutions
- to grow in spiritual maturity

- **Assessing a Person's Spirituality:** When someone comes to you for counseling, you must assess where they are at spiritually. Guiding individuals through a process of healing and restoration is greatly helped if they have received salvation through confessing and believing. Without God, they cannot change their heart. Secondly, they enter into the process of dealing with sin, and then the discipline of learning obedience to God and dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit. Turning away from sin and trusting in God must happen over and over in our lives, because in this life we will never arrive at perfection.

- **Is the person a Christian?**
(Romans 5:1, John 3:36)
- **How are they dealing with sin?**
(Ephesians 4:22-24, Colossians 3:9-10)
- **Are they relying on the Word of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit?**
(Romans 12:1-2, Philippians 2:12-16)

- **The Process of Biblical Counseling:** Through talking to the person being counseled, the counselor will identify:

- **False beliefs to correct**
(*Do they have a false view of God, self, salvation or sin?*)
- **Sins to repent of**
(*Are they in denial of a sin, or unrepentant?*)
- **Unmet spiritual needs**
(*Are they looking for love, significance, security or identity in someone or in something other than God?*)



After identifying these three things, we can help them to correct these through God’s Word. We must present God as the ultimate source of truth who can meet our deepest needs.

- **Different medicine for different ailments:** We must pray for discernment to counsel each person who comes to us for help. Our response will differ depending on their need. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 urges us to *“admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all”*. This may be one of the most significant verses for pastoral counselors! Some people will need to be chastised and corrected firmly in order to repent of their sin. Some will need wisdom and truth. Others will need gentle encouragement and hope. Our task is to be patient with each one, trusting in God for healing.

TASK:

Divide participants into groups of 4-6. In these small groups, have them read one or two of the following scenarios. Imagine this person has come to you for counseling. You will have to identify:

What false beliefs must be corrected?

What sins must be repented of?

To whom or what are they looking (other than God) to meet their needs for love, significance, security or identity?

Scenario 1	Scenario 2
A man would like to divorce his wife because he has met someone new and would like to marry her instead. The new woman makes him feel important and powerful, and his wife does not truly understand him. He is seeking your advice on how to proceed with the divorce.	A woman feels depressed and unable to meet her family’s needs because of her great sorrow. She feels she can never measure up to the standards God and others have for her, and she can no longer contain her deep sadness. She feels unloved and unworthy. She sometimes wishes to end her life, and knows she needs help to recover from depression.
Scenario 3	Scenario 4
A woman has decided she must leave the church; she is struggling to have faith in God after some crimes were committed against her. If God loves her, she can’t understand why He would let these horrible things happen. She is weak in her faith and does not know how to forgive God.	A young man is brought to you by his parents. He is consumed with anger and has been abusing alcohol. He has destroyed most of his healthy relationships due to anger issues. He feels he has a right to express how he feels, and that the world is against him.

**TEACH:**

- ❖ **Counseling as Part of the Pastoral Role:** When a pastor is available to the people of his congregation and perhaps those in the community to talk through problems and to offer advice, he is engaging in pastoral counseling. Appointments are made to discuss specific issues. These can take place at the church, or at the home of the person who needs help.

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PASTOR WHO COUNSELS	
Good counseling requires certain actions and responsibilities. None of us can make another person change or make right choices, but we can offer counsel, friendship and support to encourage them.	
Love	See the person they are counseling as a child of God, made in His image, full of worth and potential, regardless of what they have done in the past.
Listen Carefully	Actively listen to the issues and problems presented, and pay careful attention to what is said and not said. To make sure your understanding of the details is accurate, summarize what you have heard by saying, "What I hear you saying is..."
Ask Questions	Invite further detail and ask about specific patterns of sin in order to have a clear picture of the problem and discern the root cause(s). To help them see the truth, ask questions like, "Is there something you are doing that God would call sin?" "How has your behaviour contributed to the problem?" "Do those thoughts reflect the mind of Christ?"
Explore History	Problems are often a reflection of incorrect beliefs about sin, salvation, who we are, or the nature of God. Sometimes understanding the source of our wrong thoughts can help us to resolve them. Putting others in the place of authority that belongs to God alone is problematic, as is confusion about our own worth.
Counsel from the Word	Advice should be from the Bible. This counsel may confront sins that must be repented of, point out necessary changes in behaviour or thought patterns, or encourage the offender to seek forgiveness. Counsel should be specific, and often outlines the steps that are necessary. When a person knows they need to change, you are there to help them do it. Point them towards God and His Word.
Demonstrate Hope	We must believe that God can redeem and repair every broken person. We should be encouraging, patient, and offer help over a period of time because these problems do not have quick solutions.
Keep Confidence	A pastor who cannot keep information received in counseling sessions confidential will not gain the trust of his congregation. You must keep personal information out of the public, telling no one what you heard.
Know When to Refer	It would be foolish to assume we are the best person to counsel every situation. Pastors must treat only what they are able to, and not be afraid to refer to others when necessary. Perhaps an elder has more experience in a particular area, or a physician could treat a physical symptom that is impeding spiritual healing. Use discernment to know when to refer the individual being counselled, and to whom, for the best help.



RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ONE BEING COUNSELED	
Counseling effectively requires a commitment from the person receiving advice from the pastor. They must enter into counseling willing to hear a different perspective, receive help, and make new choices.	
Honesty with Counselor	In order for counseling to be effective, the person being counseled must not lie to or withhold information from the counselor. They must commit to honesty, full disclosure, and a resistance to protect their reputation by concealing sin.
Faith in God	The person being counseled must put faith in God's ability to change them. Complete faith should not be put in the counselor, but a certain level of trust is necessary.
Willingness to Change	The person being counselled must commit to attempt change. They are responsible for making the right or wrong choice. Not all counseling requires repentance. In the case of grief or trauma, comfort is required instead.

- **Counseling the Whole Congregation:** The act of counseling individual members of the congregation can be time consuming and difficult, especially if the church is large. The pastor should prioritize those in greatest need, and empower others (such as church elders) to counsel also. The pastor can counsel the whole congregation during sermons by addressing wrong ideas about self, salvation, or God. This is not as effective as individual counseling, but in combination can help improve the spiritual health of a church and its individual members.
- ❖ **Occasions Requiring Counseling:** Ideally, people who desire pastoral counseling will contact the pastor to set up a time for such. There are other times when the pastor may reach out to someone who is in difficulty, and offer to meet with them either formally or informally. Pastors should be prepared to offer counseling sessions for particular stages of life, such as preparing for marriage. A few examples are:
 - **Pre-Marriage:** This counseling is focused on ensuring both people have similar expectations of marriage and understand the Biblical foundation for their union.
 - **Marriage:** This counseling is focused on resolving conflict, improving communication, and reliance on God to help love, honour and respect one another.
 - **Family:** This counseling is sometimes able to help parents and children resolve conflict, improve trust and communication, and improve parenting skills.
 - **Faith:** This counseling is focused on crisis of faith, loss of trust in God, answering difficult questions, and helping a person to return to relationship with God.
 - **Grief:** This counseling is focused on mourning with those who mourn, providing hope from the scriptures, comforting while encouraging them to rely on God, and helping them find a place within Christian community for healing and restoration.
 - **Prison:** This counseling is focused on asking God for forgiveness, identifying and confessing sins for salvation, as well as bringing hope, healing and peace through the Word of God to prisoners who are shut off from community.



- **Forgiveness:** This counseling is focused on healing after relational trauma, hurt or crisis, and helping a person to identify the hurt, forgive the offender, and seek healing from God.

- ❖ **Benefits and Dangers of Pastoral Counseling:** This task of a pastor is heavy and complex, but we have the assurance that God is the one who offers solutions to people's problems. The pastor receives wisdom from God's Word to counsel those in need. There are many benefits to pastors counseling their people, but there are also potential dangers that we must be aware of.
 - **Benefits:** Unlike professional secular counselors, the pastoral relationship extends beyond the counseling sessions, and he can observe and encourage a person over a period of time. A pastor can also identify people within the church community who can help and pray for an individual.
 - **Dangers:** Counseling can be immensely stressful in the life of a pastor, and they must be careful to maintain their other duties of leading a church, including preaching and teaching, discipling and managing people. For this reason, some pastors will identify gifted elders to help with the task of counselling people in the congregation. The pastor must not neglect personal study, his family, or his health.

Additionally, there are dangers when some people become dependent on the pastor, or desire an inappropriate relationship with them. It is wise when men are counseling women to not counsel them alone. Another person (possibly the pastor's wife) may sit in on the session, or the door left open for visibility.

We must be careful not to enter into counseling to meet our own needs, such as satisfying our curiosity about the problems of others, seeking control of others, or wanting people to affirm and thank us. We must enter into counseling sessions prayerfully, humbly, and seeking God's guidance and help.

- ❖ **Conclusion:** Pastors are responsible for the spiritual health of their people. At the same time, they must also maintain their own spiritual health through the Word of God. Biblical counseling is an important aspect of the pastoral role, and it is worth the effort to train for and practise this skill. It requires relying on God to equip us and to minister through us.



DISCUSSION

- ❖ Describe the counseling ministry of your church. How could it be improved in order to meet the needs of the people?
- ❖ Having studied this lesson, what are the differences between Biblical counseling and secular counseling or advice? To what sources do people in your community often go when they have trouble and need help?
- ❖ Is it difficult or easy for you to admit you need help? How do we know that God wants us to help one another in this regard? What are the dangers of never admitting our needs to one another?
- ❖ What could you do today to offer wise counsel and Biblical truth to someone who is struggling emotionally? Even if it is just to share a Scripture verse or offer to pray with them, who do you know who could use some guidance and loving comfort?

PRAYER

Close the lesson in prayer. Pray that your participants would be compassionate, wise, and humble as they counsel people in order to build up the body of Christ. Pray that they will revere the Word of God, study it daily, and rely on its truth to guide them in helping others. Pray that the church would be strong, and that God would be glorified even in our brokenness, weakness and failures. Pray that we would bear one another's burdens for the cause of Christ and the health of the Church.