

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership Study 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.

The Study Guide is intended for an individual to look deeper into a specific lesson on their own. The lessons can be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials, such as the video and audio productions found on www.discipleshipessentials.org.



PASTORAL BASICS

LESSON 3: THE PASTOR AS COUNSELOR

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

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.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

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.

GETTING STARTED

1. 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?

2. 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?



STUDY

❖ **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.
- **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.
- Can you think of specific situations in which you would have benefited from counselling in the past?

- How has God already used you to counsel others?

❖ **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. Write down what the Bible directs us to do in each of the following verses.

Verses	Direction for Counseling
Galatians 6:2	
1 Thessalonians 5:11	
John 13:34-35	
2 Timothy 3:16	
Romans 15:14	
Ephesians 4:13	

As you can see, we are commanded by God to counsel one another, whether or not we have studied and trained for it. When we focus on helping others attain spiritual maturity, when we use the Word of God to correct, train and encourage each other, and when we seek wisdom in order to instruct, we are engaging in counseling.

- **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.
- What does the Bible tell us in Hebrews 4:12? How does the Word of God help us correct false intentions of the heart?



➤ **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?**
- **How are they dealing with sin?**
- **Are they relying on the Word of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit?**

➤ **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.

- What does 1 Thessalonians 5:14 urge us to do? List the different types of people given in this verse, and what our response to each person should be.

- When someone needs admonishment and truth, it would be wrong to simply offer them encouragement. It would also be unproductive to chastise the weak



or fainthearted. Our task is to be patient with each one, trusting in God for healing.

- ❖ **COUNSELING PRACTICE:** Let us look at some possible counseling situations in order to put into practice what we have learned so far. In each of the following situations, consider the questions that follow and write down your answers.

SCENARIO 1	
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.	
What false beliefs must be corrected?	
What sins must be repented of?	
To whom or what are they looking to meet their needs for love, significance, security and identity?	

SCENARIO 2	
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.	
What false beliefs must be corrected?	
What sins must be repented of?	
To whom or what are they looking to meet their needs for love, significance, security and identity?	



SCENARIO 3	
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.	
What false beliefs must be corrected?	
What sins must be repented of?	
To whom or what are they looking to meet their needs for love, significance, security and identity?	

SCENARIO 4	
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.	
What false beliefs must be corrected?	
What sins must be repented of?	
To whom or what are they looking to meet their needs for love, significance, security and identity?	

- ❖ **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.

❖ **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.



SUMMARY

- ❖ Sheep are in danger of losing their way, and so are Christians – even if they belong to a strong church. A pastor can help in times of trouble and crisis, and give advice.
- ❖ Even though a pastor may not be trained in counseling methods, they are qualified and commanded by God to counsel. They need to genuinely love those they lead, and have a passion for helping them experience God’s healing.
- ❖ The goals of Biblical counseling are to develop a Biblical view of life, name problems in Biblical terms, seek Biblical solutions, and enable others to grow in Biblical maturity.
- ❖ The process of Biblical counseling involves assessing a person’s spiritual need, correcting false beliefs, encouraging the repentance of sin, and helping them look to God to meet their needs for love, significance, security and identity.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. 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?

2. 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?