

Basic Guidance for the First Counseling Session

Moving the eyes of your counselee's heart away from you, as their helper, to God, the everlasting Helper, should be the primary goal of your first counseling session. How can you do this, practically speaking? Here's some basic guidance.

Direct Them to the Ever-present Helper and God's Throne of Grace

Begin by thanking the person for showing a desire to seek God's help for their particular life struggle. Assure them you are not the fixer-upper man or woman, but that God is our Helper and He has given His infallible Word and Spirit to be our counselors (Ps. 119:105; John 14:26). Remind them that Jesus is the merciful and empathetic High Priest who has experienced every form of suffering we can imagine and more (Heb. 4:15). Read Psalm 46 together.

Instruct them that, since Jesus is our High Priest, the door to God's throne room is already open (Heb. 4:16; 10:19-20). Lead them in prayer. Thank God for being our ever-present help in times of trouble, and ask Him to guide your time together, lead you into His truth, open your spiritual eyes and ears to see and hear from His Word, make your hearts teachable, help you to be slow to speak and quick to listen to each other, give hope, and move your wills to be doers of the Word and not merely hearers who delude ourselves (Ps. 119:12, 18; James 1:19, 22).

Listen Much, Speak Little

Read Proverbs 18:13 to them, "He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him." Then say something like, "This verse tells us that it is foolish to speak before listening. Since I have no desire to be a fool, I plan to let you do most of the talking today. I will probably ask you a lot of questions. My goal is to listen more than I speak."

Scripture exhorts us to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). In other words, effective ministry to others requires that we connect with them at the level of their concern. It is rare for a person to be able to understand and describe the root problem for which they have come to you for help. Instead, they will usually describe symptoms (like we all do when we visit our medical physician). They may *think* they are describing their problems, but they are usually telling you how they feel, what relational problems they may be experiencing, and what other burdens they carry with them. Be patient. Don't butt in right away saying, "You're not really telling me your problems, but only symptoms." Let them talk. In time, with the Lord's help, and usually not in the first session, you will gently lead them to see at least one root spiritual need as it relates to either love for God or neighbor, or both.

Ask Questions

Do your best to interpret their language, but many times you will need clarification from them. The understanding counselor does this by drawing out a person's thoughts (Prov. 20:5). To gain understanding, ask questions such as, "You say you feel your wife does not respect you. Can you tell me what specifically causes you to feel that way?" or "You say your husband doesn't love you anymore. Why do you think that?" or "Can you tell me what you mean when you say you asked Jesus into your heart?" or "What do you see as your biggest problem? What have you done to solve it?" or "In what ways are you hoping that I will be a help to you? What do you hope your life will look like when we have finished counseling together?"

Apply Appropriate Scriptures

Again, remember that your goal during the first session is to listen well and communicate hope and compassion. Listen for "red threads" running through their words which reveal patterns of thinking. As you do, jot down simple thoughts on your notepad, and draw their attention to one or two pertinent hope-giving Scriptures. The Spirit will guide you as you listen well, but it is good to follow the example of the wise preacher from Ecclesiastes and always have on hand a "sample platter" of carefully selected morsels of truth to feed your counselee's soul (Eccl. 12:10-11).

Give Biblical Hope through Homework

Communicating to them that God's Word has the answers, and that God will truly help the person who is willing to walk in the obedience of faith will give the encouragement that is so important at this point. This hope will often propel the person toward biblical change in heart, mind, and action. Giving them an appropriate assignment will engage their heart and mind in the process of change before you meet again. Homework gives them personal responsibility for their own growth, thus encouraging action toward change (Phil. 2:12-13). Homework tests the sincerity of their desire and willingness to grow and is a large part of leading them toward daily mind renewal, as it will activate and direct their thinking toward biblical truth (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:23).

Take Them Back to the Throne of Grace in Prayer

As you wrap up your meeting, together thank God for the assurance of His help and presence. Ask for the Spirit's help in applying the resources He has provided. Understand the value of prayer as part of your counseling. Take time to pray *with* them, not just for them.

Questions for Reflection

- How would you describe your listening skills?
- In what ways does God want you to grow in genuine love and compassion?
- How important to you is praying *with* your counsees?
- In what ways might you intentionally move the focus of your counselee from you, as the helper, to God, the everlasting Helper

Paul Tautges, July 23, 2018, *Basic Guidance for the First Counseling Session*

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