

Biblical Counseling Training 101

Class 8 – Step Four: Interpreting Problems Biblically

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to them who love Him and are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. Romans 8:28-29

Take a moment to share your memory verse from last week, Proverbs 18:13, with your table. Also, share anything you observed from either the article you were to have read or the intake form.

I. Discern Problems

- A. Appropriate data must be gathered.
Data gathering comes from the “intake form” and from your initial interview with the counselee and the story they have expressed. You learn from *what they say the problem is, from what they are doing about the problem, from any contributing causes to the problem and from any unbiblical thinking you notice* as you listen to them. This includes answers they give to both your general questions and the questions for targeted populations (see the list from last week again on today’s page 5).
- B. Accurate initial interpretation of the data.
After you read the intake inventory and discuss with them the problems as they see it, etc., you will need to make an initial assessment and evaluation as to what you think may be the problem. This comes with experience. It is helpful to have both practical and biblical categories in mind. We’ll come back to this idea in a few minutes.

II. Some important principles to keep in mind:

- A. Use biblical language to describe problems
Language matters. Classic psychological labels will almost always hurt biblical thinking and correction.

Classic Labels	Biblical Language
Oppositional Defiant Disorder	Rebellious & Stubborn
Disease of alcoholism	Drunk, Drink to excess, Given to much wine
Affair / Fell out of love	Adultery
Co-Dependent	Fear of man/not trusting God
Weakness / Bad choice	Sin
Addiction to pornography	Adultery in heart, bondage to lust

- B. Common “*medical*” and psychological/sociological labels often get in the way. Reason? There are two principles in philosophy, law, politics and education that “*the one who gets to ask the questions determines the direction of the conversation,*” and “*a question well-asked is half solved.*” It is similar with the one who determines the language and labels of a conversation about problems. What the Bible calls things we can address, but we lose clarity, direction, confidence, and power when we get moved off the Bible’s assertions from the beginning and miss its prescriptions.

Very good book to examine this issue a bit more is Welch's *Why Christians Can't Trust Psychology*. [This is an issue with widespread disagreement in Christian circles. For example, Gary Collins' wrote his spin on the question, *Why Christians Can Trust Psychology*.]

- C. This part of counseling requires practice. One way to do that is to attend our monthly "Biblical Counselors' Lab" on the 2nd or 3rd Thursday 7-9 to hear how people are doing this. Each time I hear someone describe a "biblical category" for an issue, it helps.
- D. CASE STUDIES we may have used one other time.

One

"Glenn and Carla Wilson" are a couple from your CG in their mid-thirties. They've been married 13 years with three kids age 5, 7 and 9. They say they have communication problems that have not improved since they each came to know Christ about eight years ago. She complains he is insensitive to her needs and doesn't really lead the kids like he should. She also says he is very self-focused. He complains she calls him names, compares him to her dad and manifests a critical, controlling spirit. He portrays that he "jumps" as high as she requires. He says they haven't been intimate in over six months and he is almost getting to where he doesn't care. She admits her spiritual life isn't what it needs to be and he admits he is sometimes too tired or preoccupied when he is at home to really focus on the Lord.

DISCUSSION in a few minutes: What issues need counseling help?

Two

"Gretchen Billings" is referred to you and your spouse from the Counseling Ministry for a "single parenting" issue. Divorced five years ago, her 14 year old son and 15 year old daughter are talking back, disrespectful, complaining, and resentful about responsibilities and are not interested in spiritual things. Their dad isn't much help; they see him maybe once a month. She brings him up as the source of her problems multiple times. She says she has no friends now, feels like God is far away and that His word is dry. She says her only "respite" is when her mom or her older sister comes to help. She complains that she is powerless to effect any real change, comes across as wanting to be rescued, and tends to use lots of words and lots of emotion.

DISCUSSION in a few minutes: What issues need counseling help?

E. Levels of Problems to be Considered

1. Presenting problems (overall problem making them seek help)
Gretchen: My kids will not mind.
Glenn: Communication and Carla is critical and controlling.
Carla: Communication and Glenn is self-focused and doesn't take lead or help.
2. Performance problems (acts that prompted this problem to be addressed now instead of sooner or later or not at all)
Gretchen: I am powerless to improve anything.
Glenn: I can never make her happy (so why bother?)
Carla: I can't do everything by myself.
Glenn: Self-protective, idolizing peace and quiet.
Carla: Controlling, idolizing a strong father and husband
3. Preconditioning problems (habitual patterns of thought and behavior, family history, etc. – "sins of the parents")
Gretchen: My husband left. My older sister and my mom make things better. (Maybe a youngest child?)
Glenn – we don't have anything to tell us what to do except her demands

- Carla – Father's strength used as a litmus test by which to evaluate her husband
4. Heart-level problems (e.g., idols, James 4:1-3)
Gretchen: She wants life not to be hard and for someone to make things better.
- F. Other
1. Look for perspectives and patterns
Gretchen: *Someone should take care of me. I need life to work. God is only useful if He makes my kids mind and has people do for me what I can't do.*
Glenn: *What do you expect? She is always unhappy and always controlling things. I can't ever make her happy. If she'd get off my back, we'd be fine.*
Carla: *Our family will disintegrate if he doesn't step up and take care of things. I have to control because he won't. I have no respect for him.*
 2. Look for complicating factors (to help you discern problem)
 - ⇒ Lack of understanding God's grace and their own new identity?
 - ⇒ Lack of discipline, commitment or perseverance?
 - Is Gretchen committed to trust the Lord, walk by faith, be firm and loving, and entrust her children to a God who can do great things even if their dad left and they had some bad attitude teen years?
 - Is Glenn committed to lead, love and sacrifice, regardless of how well Carla appreciates it? Is he committed to lay down his life for them?
 - Is Carla ready to trust God, help her husband, respect him and do the best with what God allows her for contentment?
 - ⇒ Lack of repentance? Lack of honor for God's commands?
 - How sensitive are they to their own sins and how committed to a 2 Cor. 5:9 life?
 - ⇒ Lack of biblical goals? Of accountability?
 - Do these people have targets to pursue that would be God honoring?

III. Discuss the Cases

1. Glenn and Carla Wilson

Practical		Biblical	
How do they define problem?		How might God define them?	
How are they responding?		Where is God/His Word in their thinking?	
Any big issue they want addressed now?		Any clear biblical growth you think needs work soon?	

2. Gretchen Billings

Practical		Biblical	
How do they define problem?		How might God define them?	
How are they responding?		Where is God/His Word in their thinking?	
Any big issue they want addressed now?		Any clear biblical growth you think needs work soon?	

IV. Homework

Memory verse Romans 8:28-29. If you know 8:28, you have only to memorize verse 29. If you do not know v. 28, memorize it the first week and memorize verse 29 the second week. Again, the Bible memory principles we shared: (15 minutes)

- Do little chunks at a time that give you success, usually just a clause or two:
 - And we know God causes all things to work together for good
 - For them who love Him and are called according to His purpose
 - For whom He foreknew, He predestined to become conformed
 - To the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn of many brethren
- Repeat clause one 8-10 times in the morning and again in the evening (Mon&Tue)
- When you have it down, do the next clause 8-10 times am/pm (Wed&Thur)
- If there's more, continue on Friday and Saturday to do the next clause/s
- When you have done each one of them, now combine them, and add the "address" (the biblical location of Bible book, chapter, verse/s)

Review the areas of common questioning, page 5. (8-10 minutes)

Read the two page article about today's topic that is helpful, pages 6-7 (12 minutes).

Review your notes over the past six weeks, so that you can have a working grasp of the first four steps and what we are doing in biblical counseling and why. (25-45 minutes)

Probing (*Repeated from last week*)

1. Probe “extensively” (general, more overview) *These are areas that will be on the data inventory and that you ought to get a sense of pretty early on.*

- a. Spiritual life
- b. Family Life
- c. Work / School
- d. Physical Well-Being
- e. Financial status
- f. Social connectedness
- g. Current concerns

2. Probe “intensively” (specific areas problems are likely to lodge). While you process their data sheet and have initial contact, it is not uncommon for your counselee to have problems in areas common to their age or stage in life. This is obviously not always the case, but pay attention for themes such as:

- a. **With children**
Relationships with parents, peers, teachers and school issues
- b. **With youth and singles**
Previous list, sexuality, dating issues, self-destructive tendency and early addictions
Communication breakdown with key people in their life
Meaning of life and identity issues keyed around self-concept as it relates to competencies and relationships/connectedness
Life direction and finances, affective disorders (anger issues, anxiety, depression)
- c. **With older singles**
Identity (who am I in a “married” world)
Spiritual development holes and unresolved past relationship issues
Resentment about marital status, addictive behaviors, “affective” disorders
Bad habits, immorality or unresolved guilt (e.g., over abortion)
Disorganization and lack of responsible follow through
- d. **With married persons**
Key relationships (husband-wife, children, extended family)
Work and/or financial issues
Health concerns
Immorality and/or addictions
- e. **With men**
Anger and sexual issues, depression issues (especially at later mid-life)
Competencies,
Disconnected relationships
- f. **With women**
Husband issues
Loneliness / Depression
Fear issues (especially about money, children or the future)
Anger and bitterness
Sexual or relational temptations
“Abuse recovery” issues

- g. With retired or older persons**
 - Health, physical limits and fear of death
 - Grown children and grandchildren
 - Loneliness and grief that may metastasize into self-pity
 - Depression and lack of purpose
 - Finances
- h. With disabled persons**
 - Managing life and finances
 - Resentment & Self-Pity
 - Loneliness, Uselessness and Depression
 - Manipulation of others

IDENTIFY THE ROOT PROBLEM

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Three Obstacles Hinder Identifying Root Problems

1. **Autonomy**
2. **Blame shifting**
3. **A Victim Mentality**

- **AUTONOMY**

What is "autonomy?" It is the condition or quality of being autonomous; independence. When applied to a person, it means acting independently of God, deciding for yourself what is right and wrong. So, how does autonomy hinder getting to the real problem so that it can be solved?

Years ago, more than 25 by now, I heard Dr. Warren Wiersbe say, "At the heart of every problem is a problem of the heart." That little saying stuck in my mind and I have found it to be true over and over again. Heart problems, spiritual problems, are at the root of our problems. Why? Because every problem we face presents us with a choice. We can either trust and obey the Lord and do His will which will bring us closer to mental-emotional stability (**Isa. 26:3-4**), or, we can act independently and do our will which will bring us closer to mental-emotional calamity (**Isa. 57:20-21**).

All we have to do is look at what King David's hidden adulterous relationship with Bathsheba did to him mentally, emotionally and physically. Listen to David's own words in **Psalms 32:3-4** -- *When I kept silent, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah.*

Psalms 51 deals with the same incident. You can easily see from reading this passage that doing his own will in the Bathsheba incident made him feel dirty, cost him his joy, made him doubt his salvation and was the source of great feelings of guilt. But you can also see from both **Psalms 32 & 51** when he dealt with his problem biblically, confessed and obeyed the Lord, mental and emotional stability returned (**Psalms 32:5** *I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah.*)

I like how David closes **Psalms 32:10-11** *Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the LORD, mercy shall compass him about. 11 Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart.*

Remember, every problem we face presents us with a choice. We can either trust and obey the Lord and do His will which will bring us closer to mental-emotional stability or, we can act independently and do our will which will bring us closer to mental-emotional calamity.

- **Let's see the second obstacle to identifying root problems... BLAME SHIFTING**

Over the years I have found that the main reason most married people initially seek counseling is to get their partner to change. Rather than focusing on what they should do to better the situation, each is hoping that their partner heard what the pastor said because their partner sure needs it and they are really to blame to the problems in the marriage. "If my wife would just be submissive" he says. "If my husband would just cherish me" she says.

When you blame another person or circumstance for your problems, you are saying, "I'm not responsible for this problem. It's not my problem. You can't hold me accountable for that!"

The fact is, that blame shifting is as old as Adam and Eve. Let's read **Genesis 3:9-13**. Nobody wanted to take responsibility for the problem. Too many people spend too much time and emotional energy trying to fix the blame instead of working on identifying their part of the problem.

- **The third obstruction to seeing the root problems is... A "VICTIM" MENTALITY**

The "victim mentality" is BIG in our day. Everyone is a victim. And, when you are a victim you are not responsible for the things you think, word you say, emotions you feel or actions you take. In short, you are not held responsible for your sin when you are a victim in our society. The Reginald Denny case, Bobbit case and the Menendez brothers' case illustrates my point.

Though that may be society's attitude, that is not to be the Biblical attitude. Through the power of God Christians have the opportunity and ability to be victors instead of victims. Think for a moment of the case of Joseph. He was hated by his brothers (**Gen 37:4-8**), envied by his brothers (**Gen. 37:11**), kidnapped by them and sold into slavery (**Gen. 37:28**). From there, things got worse. He is falsely accused of attempted rape and put in prison (**Gen. 39**). Joseph could have adopted the victim mentality and when his brothers came before him years later he had the authority to have them skinned alive. Who could have blamed him for murdering them? God would have held him responsible - that's who!

Joseph refused consider himself a victim. There is no hint that he was bitter. Joseph had trusted God and knew that God had a purpose in allowing all this to happen. Joseph was a VICTOR ! (See **Gen. 45:3-8**; **Gen. 50:15-21**)

In summary, three obstacles hamper dealing with root problems -- *Autonomy, Blame Shifting, & A Victim Mentality*. Don't be responsible for throwing them in someone's path.