



Gathering Data and Interpreting Problems Biblically

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Presented by FBC Women's Biblical Counselor Kathy Budnie

The main idea: To help people with their problems, you must listen carefully to them and get accurate information. After considering the data, you must define the problem biblically; a biblical definition of the problem is the key to discovering God's solution to the problem.

Gather Accurate Data

First, think about what you already know.

- What do you know about the person? (This might or might not be accurate.)
 - What have other people said about the person? (This might or might not be accurate.)
 - Read the Data Intake Form if you're doing FBC biblical counseling (People tend to tell the truth on their intake forms, but they almost always leave out important information, either purposely, or because they don't know the importance of some information.)
- >>>So do this: Take notes on the above information, and save emails concerning the person. If you have an intake form, make notes on it—what you want details on, specific questions you have, patterns you see, significant events in the person's life, etc.)

Second, make an appointment to talk with the person (unless you're already with him/her).

- State the apparent problem to the person, and ask what's going on. For example, "You said you have felt depressed lately. What's going on?"
 - **Listen!!!!!!** How? (See the Appendix for Listening Skills Suggestions.)
 - Listen carefully, patiently, and compassionately, not judgmentally.
 - Listen as you'd like to be listened to.
 - Listen respectfully. If you try to give advice or quick fixes, you will come across as prideful, condescending, and disrespectful.
 - As you listen to the person's words (verbal), also look for non-verbal messages in body language. Listen to tone of voice and confidence in speaking.
- >>>So do this: Remind yourself to listen. Take yourself out of casual "chit chat" mode, and put yourself into focused "counseling mode." Rely on God to help you listen well.

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Third, remember: The purpose of listening is to understand the person as well as you can.

- Take notes.
 - Ask if taking notes would be OK.
 - Promise that everything said and written will be confidential. Keep the promise!
- Things to listen for:
 - The person's story about the troubling situation. This is all you might need to know if the difficulty had a definite beginning, such as the loss of a loved one, a medical problem, how to deal with a difficult co-worker or neighbor, etc.
 - The person's life story. The more abstract the problem (such as depression), the more you will need to know about the person's whole life—family background, upbringing, experiences as a child and teen, losses, life-changing decisions, past marriages, deaths, college, past jobs, military service, etc.
 - News-reporting facts: Who? What? When? Where?
 - Editorial facts: Why? How? How much? How often? How long?
 - Attitudes, emotions, motives, goals, and desires. Do you see any patterns?
 - How was the person treated by others? Any patterns?
 - How did the person respond to others in Christ-like ways? In sinful ways?
 - Indications of the person's relationship with God.
- When may you talk while listening to the person's story?
 - To ask the news-reporting and editorial facts (see above section)
 - To clarify: "What do you mean by ____?" (Do not assume you know what the person means when he/she uses:
 - Colloquial words (such as "jazzed," "fit to be tied," or "weirded out")
 - Vague phrases (such as "We had a fight" or "He's mean to me")
 - Abstract descriptions (such as angry, painful, lonely, or upset)
 - Religious terms (such as "prayed," "went forward," or "got saved")
 - To get more information about a certain subject: "Please tell me more about...?"
 - To discover motives, goals, and desires: "What made you decide to do that?"
 - To gauge the person's knowledge of God. If he/she seems like a non-believer or an immature Christian, ask "What do you know about Jesus?" (See the Creation-to-Christ outline in the Appendix for a suggested way to help people understand who Jesus Christ is, and to put "Jesus died for my sins" in a biblical context.)
 - To gauge a mature believer's current relationship with God: "How's your relationship with God these days?"

>>>So do this: Bring a small notebook and pens to record information. Feel free to make a one-page "cheat sheet" of things that you want to ask and listen for.

Gathering data is ongoing when counseling someone, but when you have obtained enough information that the person feels understood (You can ask!), then you may proceed to the next step—Interpreting the Problem Biblically. Don't be hasty! Finding God's biblical perspective on the person's problems generally comes after asking God for wisdom, prayerfully considering the data, reviewing your notes, and looking for recurring themes in the person's life.

Interpret Problems Biblically

- To “interpret” is to give meaning, especially to a large, complicated body of information.
 - Interpretation answers the question, “So what?”
 - We do biblical interpretation of a person’s life from God’s perspective.
- Below is an example of interpreting a person’s problem biblically, from chapter four of Jay Adams’s book, *The Language of Counseling*. The chapter title is “Why is Biblical Counseling So Concerned about the Labels Used to Describe People’s Problems?”

Labeling that is accurate helps the counselee to get a handle on his problems so that he can begin to do something about them. I can remember one counselee who was describing a problem he said he somehow couldn’t put his finger on. After listening for a while, I said, “Why, what you’ve been describing to me is just plain, old-fashioned pride!” Instantly, his eyes lit up and he shouted, “Ah! That’s it! Now that I have a name for it, I know what I must do about it.” The label enabled him to get a grasp of the problem and pointed to its solution....The Christian counselor will be careful about his acceptance and use of labels. Whenever possible, he will use biblical labels or labels that clearly express biblical concepts. And he will be careful to use them as the Bible does.

- When interpreting a person’s problem biblically, beware of using secular labels. Why?
 - Secular observations are often correct, but with no measure of right and wrong (God), only naturalistic causes and liberal social ideas are used to interpret them.
 - People are often viewed as stuck—permanent victims of circumstances.
 - Secular psychology emphasizes “Get your needs fulfilled,” not pleasing God.
 - Pride (wanting to be like God, to have life your way) is not seen as the root of sin.
 - Problems are labeled as diseases or disorders rather than as sin. For example:
 - Dysfunctional = Sinful
 - Co-dependent = Fear of people, not trusting or reverencing God
 - Affair = Adultery
 - Alcoholic = Tempted to drunkenness
 - Bad Choice = Sin
 - Addiction to pornography = lust
- “Name that Sin” is an exercise in interpreting problems biblically. Please use the list of biblical sins at the top of the page to fill in the blanks by the quotes. There are no absolute right answers, but a list of possible answers is on the back of this page.

Again, the main idea: To help people with their problems, you must listen carefully to them and get accurate information. After considering the data, you must define the problem biblically; a biblical definition of the problem is the key to discovering God’s solution to the problem.

“Name That Sin” suggested (but not the only) answers:

1. worldliness
2. self-centeredness
3. factions
4. pride
5. lust
6. discord
7. rebellion
8. critical spirit
9. bitterness
10. stubbornness
11. hatred
12. impatience
13. foolishness
14. lying
15. worry
16. stealing
17. disobedience
18. self-indulgence
19. rage
20. envy
21. selfishness
22. adultery
23. lack of faith
24. gossip
25. immorality
26. fear
27. impurity
28. cruelty
29. greed
30. resentment

Listening Skills Suggestions

Six Impediments to Good Listening:

1. Rehearsing – Planning what you will say or ask while they are still talking. If you're tempted to do this, give yourself time to think after they speak. You can quietly think, or you can tell them, "Give me a second to process that..."
2. Mind Reading – Thinking you know what they will say. Finishing their sentences. Holding hypotheses too tightly when new information might re-direct you.
3. (Over) Identifying – Instead of giving a summary of what they said or in some way showing that you are tracking with them, you say, "I know exactly what you mean. The same thing happened to my sister..." Essentially, you are trying too hard to identify with them.
4. Dreaming – Letting your mind wander. If it happens, either they are not talking about the real issue and just want a companion, or you might not be caring.
5. Derailing – Moving their conversation too quickly to what you want to talk about, like a doctor in a hurry might do. It is okay to lead and guide, but patience and care are necessary.
6. Placating – Agreeing with them in order to avoid conflict. The opposite of this is contending with them whenever what they've said isn't good. Avoid that, too.

Six Components of Good Listening:

1. Waiting - Giving them time to think, to gather their thoughts, to gain direction. Not being in a hurry to prematurely judge.
2. Attending - Giving them your attention, following their discussion and their heart. Attending Involves accurate empathy and is the most important part of gaining involvement. People who attend well are always regarded by their mentees as people who care, listen, and understand.
3. Clarifying - Following up questions/statements to get them to clarify a topic already raised. "Are you saying...?" "Tell me a little more about what happened leading up to this..."
4. Reflecting - Succinctly restating something they said in the same or slightly different words, in order to be sure you got it and to encourage them that you understand. There is a fine line between doing this too much and neglecting it.
5. Summarizing - Succinctly connecting the main points expressed since the last time you summarized. This takes practice. It helps launch the next part of the conversation. Summarizing is also useful when you might need to re-state what they've said and contrast it with more biblical terms.
6. Agreeing - Affirming those things which you can rightly affirm. Agreeing when possible builds trust and helps them know that you are not against them.

From "Gather Relevant Data and Evaluate the Problem Biblically" by John Morrison, 2016

“Creation to Christ”

The Big Perspective on God’s Work in Scripture

Creation: God created the earth to be a beautiful, perfect place for people to live. Earth was full of God's peace, the kind of peace and joyful well-being in which everything works according to God's benevolent intentions. The world was made for humans to flourish, where we could enjoy a personal relationship with God, live with joy and gladness in the presence of our Maker, and worship God by loving Him and one another.

The Fall: In one act of disobedience, Adam and Eve rejected God's rule over them. We refer to their rebellious choice as "The Fall." Their rebellion resulted in physical and spiritual death. Because all of humanity descended from Adam and Eve, their disobedience has affected all of us in the same way. Through our attitudes, actions and words, we all naturally and pridefully declare ourselves to be independent of God, and therefore His enemies.

God’s Promise: In spite of The Fall, God pursued people because He loves us and wants a relationship with us. Immediately after Adam and Eve’s rebellious choice, God promised them that a Deliverer would come to crush Satan’s power. Over the centuries, God showed His loving concern for the people He had made by unfolding His sovereign plan of the coming Deliverer. He called Abraham to follow Him, promising him that the coming Deliverer would come from his family and bless the entire world. God rescued His people Israel from a seven-year famine by sending them to Egypt, where they increased in number. There they became slaves, but He brought them out of Egypt and began the process of making them into a great nation by giving them religious and moral laws. The promised Deliverer would come from this people, Israel. For the next several thousand years, the Israelites turned away from God to worship false gods, but God continued to pursue them. Although He disciplined them for their disobedience, God continued, through His prophets, to not only warn people of the consequences of rejecting Him, but also to reiterate His special promise that the Deliverer would come someday.

Redemption: Our loving Creator is holy, and so He shows wrath toward all sin. At the same time, He is sovereign and able to turn evil and suffering into good that will be for His ultimate glory and good purposes. God showed His love for us by sending His long-promised Deliverer. God came to earth in the form of a man Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a perfect life and kept God’s laws perfectly. When He died on the cross, Jesus took the punishment that we deserve for our sins, and He gave us His righteousness. Then He defeated Satan, as God had promised Adam and Eve, by rising from the dead. He returned to heaven and was reunited with His Father.

Restoration: When we stop trusting in our own goodness as the way to please God, and instead trust that Jesus was God who came to earth in the form of a man, died for our sins, and rose from the dead, then God gives us what He has always wanted us to have—eternal life in a loving relationship with Him. Not only that, but God has promised to someday renew the whole world. We get glimpses of that glorious future in the Bible. Christ will return to judge sin and evil and then usher in an eternal kingdom of righteousness and peace for His people.