

Wisdom in Counseling

by Paul David Tripp

Pretend you have a pencil and piece of paper in your hands. In fifty words or less, write what you think is the purpose of biblical counseling. You have to write what you think God is seeking to accomplish through you as you work with people in the context of private ministry. What are you seeking to do? What are your goals and purposes? If you had to capture that in a few brief words on a piece of paper, what would you say?

Here's my answer to that question. The purpose of biblical counseling is to change us from being fools to being wise. I want to offer you six principles that illustrate the difference between our foolishness and God's wisdom. As a backdrop to our discussion, consider the following:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God....Not many of you were wise by human standards...but God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise...so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God. (1 Cor. 1:18, 26, 27, 29, 30)

God's wisdom is to be found in this big picture, which we must keep in view as we

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deal with the details of people's struggles.

Principle One: Sin reduces us to fools.

It's not just that we do bad things; that we destroy God's good gifts; that we damage relationships; or that we have trouble being content and happy. Something more fundamental—the reason for the chaos and havoc of life in this fallen world—is found in the seeds of the foolishness that occurred in Genesis 3:6: "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it."

The human attempt at getting wisdom apart from God is the source of all human foolishness. The fact is, we were not structured to be wise apart from God. It's an ontological impossibility, much like trying to bake a cake in a washing machine. You're going to get a mess! Or like trying to wash clothes in an oven. You're going to get a fire! In all the glorious abilities that human beings have, human beings were never meant to get wisdom on their own. The fall is about the desire for autonomous, self-sufficient wisdom, wisdom that does not seek or depend on God. Romans 1:18-19 addresses this from another angle:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known

about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

In other words, God's design is willed in such a way that you can't get up in the morning without bumping into God. Literally, God is our environment.

This is how Isaiah 6:3 puts it: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory." Our God is the God who made delicate lilies and towering cliffs. He's the God who made beautiful rocks. He's the God who knew that fingers would work better if they had nails on the end of them. He's the God of thumbs, big toes, and wrist joints. He's the God who designed the glory of the human eye which can do things with such precision that all our technology cannot duplicate it.

I was at the top of Clawson Pass in Switzerland with my wife, Luella. Up there, at ten or eleven thousand feet in the Alps, there was a glacier. Through that glacier was pushing the most delicate of flowers, a small yellow flower. I looked at that flower, and I thought, "How could that be?" It defied all my reason. It pushed its way up out of the ice. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory." How could it ever be that we would ignore that revelation? God made His world this way so that we would not buy into two fundamental lies.

The first lie is the lie of autonomy, that I am an independent creature who can do what I want to do, when I want to do it, and with whom I want to do it. Life belongs to me. I'm here in and of myself. What a dangerous, terrible lie that is! That's one of the principal lies of Western culture.

The second lie is the lie of self-sufficiency, that somehow I have all that I need within myself, to be what I'm supposed to be and do what I'm supposed to do. I just need to tap into those resources. I need to learn to be the best "me" that I can be.

Notice that God made His creation to scream authority, to scream control, to scream order, to scream dependency so that we would not buy into autonomy and self-sufficiency. Let's look further at Romans:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools. (1:21, 22)

Sin reduces us to fools, and we're not just talking about the unbeliever. As long as indwelling sin remains in us, there is a regression toward foolishness in each of us. Isn't that so? You see that in counseling. A man with a committed wife and three precious children will throw it all away for fifteen or twenty minutes of selfish sexual pleasure. What utter foolishness!

We see it in our children. You've had these experiences. For example, your child comes to you at ten-thirty at night, the night before a science project is due, and says, "Dad, I need your help. I have a science project due tomorrow." (Don't you love it!) Going boldly where you do not want to go, you ask, "What do you need?" You know good and well that this assignment was given three years ago. The child says, "I need some poster board." You think you can handle that. There's enough cardboard around the house, and you have

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duct tape. (If you don't, you should buy some. It works for everything! Wise people own duct tape!) Then you ask, "What else do you need?" The child says, "I need markers." That's not too hard. If you cut the ends off of markers and pour water down them, you can get more life out of dead markers. Then you ask, "What else do you need?" The child mumbles very quickly, "Twelve baby chickens." You look at that child and you want to say, "Then lay them!" You are astounded at the utter foolishness of waiting this long. The child actually thinks that somehow you're going to materialize infant fowl for him.

Yet that same foolishness of procrastination resides in us as well. I'm a counselor. There are times when I have to make a hard phone call, but find myself reasoning that I'm not able to give the person enough time today. I'll call tomorrow. I can put off a phone call until I'm in trouble for not having made it. That's the same foolishness. That foolishness is depicted in little mundane events and huge decisions that have lifelong implications. Sin reduces us to fools, yet we claim to be wise.

This foolishness is not just a way of thinking, but a state of being. It really does express itself in everything about who we are. It's the foolishness of our desires and purposes, and the foolishness in our emotions and our thinking. It's foolishness that permeates every fiber of who we are, and gives us an inverted sense of reality. Foolishness is an upside-down world where what is bad appears good, what is worth nothing appears to be worth much, and what is healthy isn't even interesting. Who of you ended your meal last night with a great big bowl of Brussels sprouts?

Reports of murders in the newspapers and on television often use the adjective *senseless*....But why *senseless* particularly? After all, unless the killer was grossly impaired, the killing probably made sense to *him*. He was trying to silence a witness or gain revenge or express his power or act out his racist hatred or stimulate and satisfy his lust....How can an act that makes perfectly good sense to its perpetrator be judged senseless by outsiders?...When pressed, even the most

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avant-garde observer drops his moral subjectivism...and joins the rest of us in expressing shock, indignation, and the metaphysical judgment that a murder *does not belong in the world*....The murder of a human being is not the way it's supposed to be. The act is out of order. It is a senseless act because it saws against the grain of the universe.¹

Isn't that a wonderful phrase?: "Sawing against the grain of the universe." Counseling must deal with all the ways sin reduces us to fools.

Principle Two: Our foolishness, by its very nature, is idolatrous.

The fool says in his heart, "There is no god." Foolishness is a denying of God, a removing of God from His place. Whenever a human being, functionally or theologically, removes God, he will always serve some God replacement because we are—in our very natures—worshippers. You don't divide human beings into those who worship and those who don't. Every human being is a worshiper, and every act of a human being in some way expresses worship. Worship is who we are and what we do. Either I am living in proper covenantal relationship with God, or I am striking an idol covenant. Romans 1 calls this an exchange of the glory of God for images made to look like mortal man and beasts. We exchange the truth of God for a lie as we worship and serve the creation rather than the Creator. We exchange God for some God-replacement.

When we do this, we buy into myriad lies. Western

culture has exchanged biblical morality for secular psychology, and in so doing there has been a dramatic loss of shame. We have exchanged revealed truth for human philosophy; and in so doing we have experienced a dramatic loss of rationality. We're crazy! We have exchanged creaturehood for autonomous individuality; and in so doing we have sustained a dramatic loss of meaning in our culture. We end up serving the creation. That kind of idolatry lives in the way that we think, in what we desire. The idols that we serve are innumerable. Life only has meaning, and I only have worth if:

- I have power and influence over others.
- I am loved and respected by "Person X".
- I have a particular kind of look or a particular body.
- I have a certain kind of pleasure or quality of life.
- I am able to control my life and the people around me.
- People are dependent on me.
- Someone is there to protect me and keep me safe.
- I am completely free from obligations and responsibilities to take care of someone else.
- I'm highly productive and get a lot done.
- I am recognized for my accomplishments and excel in my career.
- I gain a certain level of wealth and affluence.
- I keep my religion's moral codes.
- This particular person is in my life, happy to be there, and happy with me, of course.
- I feel totally independent of organized religion and have a totally self-made morality.

Life only has meaning and I only have worth if....The list could go on. Power, approval, image, comfort, control, helping, dependence, independence, work, achievement, materialism, religion, an individual person, irreligion, race, social group, family, marriage, relationships, suffering, ideology. We literally turn the entire creation into an idol. Foolishness is, by its very nature, idolatrous. Listen again to how Cornelius Plantinga puts it:

In an ego-centered culture, wants become needs (maybe even duties), the self replaces the soul, and human life degenerates into the clamor of competing autobiographies. People get fascinated with how they feel—and with how they feel about how they feel. In such a culture and in the throes of such fascination, the self exists to be explored, indulged, and expressed but not disciplined or restrained. Self-centered religion, says David Wells, crowds out theology and objective truth. "Theology becomes therapy...The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics by feeling good about one's self.

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 113-114.

The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community of faith shrinks to a circle of personal friends. The past recedes. The Church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is the self.²

That powerfully captures the idolatrous nature of our foolishness. The true God must reclaim us, and counseling must proclaim that God.

Principle Three: We need to be rescued from our foolishness, and this is the goal of biblical counseling.

Our foolishness goes deeper than just a desire for temporal, personal happiness. It's not simply the elevation of emotion. It's something greater than the restoration of a relationship. It's very clear that our problem is not just our circumstances, our sufferings, or our experiences of life in this fallen world. Instead, it's the foolishness that *we bring* to those problems that creates such terrible habits in us. It's not the experience, but the *fool* in the middle of the experience that is the target of biblical ministry. So Scripture would take us to a deeper level in a person's life. We're not there just trying to plug principles into gaps in a person's life. We're seeking to do something at a deeper level: to rescue the fool from his foolishness and restore him to the light of the living Christ. We cannot shed our foolishness without the grace of the Lord.

Think carefully about how we handle the Word of God. We can give Scripture to people in an isolated-principle way, and their foolishness will be unchallenged. David Henderson's *Culture Shift* offers wonderful cautions.

We also often treat the Bible as if it were the ultimate how-to book, an encyclopedia of practical wisdom and insight. But the Bible is more like a novel. I can dip into my *Encyclopedia Britannica* wherever I want, read a few paragraphs, pick out the information that will benefit me, and then close it. But with a novel I can't do that. I must relate every passage, every description or conversation or turn of events to the overall plot. Otherwise, it makes no sense; at least, not its intended sense....The term *biblical* needs to be redefined. It cannot mean merely "from somewhere within the pages of Scripture." In light of the way the Bible is written, as a single fabric of thought stretching from front to back, biblical must mean "in keeping with what the Bible is about." And the Bible is about God's unstoppable passion to be known, loved, and served—

² Ibid., p. 83.

through Jesus Christ—by those he has made.

Many well-meaning people in the evangelical church have missed this. They will isolate a need, then reach into the Bible for insights that seem to address that need. But the individual is left untouched. The course of his or her life is left unchallenged, ambitions are left unchecked, the sinful nature is left unaddressed, and the fiber of his or her character is left unexposed.³

Part of the fiber of that character is foolishness. Our ministry is more than just isolated principles. It is rescuing people from their foolishness.

Principle Four: Counseling must address our heart idolatries.

We have seen that sin reduces us to fools; the nature of that foolishness is idolatry; and we need to be res-

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cued from our foolishness. To that end, counseling must always deal with the idolatries of the heart. The foolishness lives in our behavior because it first lives in our hearts. Idolatry is expressed in our relationships because it first resides in our hearts.

This idolatry is deceptive for two fundamental reasons. First, idolatry is hard for us to see and get a hold of because we tend to serve plausible idols. For most of us, the idols in our lives are not evil in and of themselves. We tend to get ruled by things that are not really that bad but that are, in some way, very good. A wife gets ruled by the love of her husband, a worker gets ruled by the respect of a boss, a parent gets ruled by a desire for the appreciation and respect of a child. You get ruled by a desire to have your life free of suffering. You get ruled by a desire that life would be free of chaos. Those don't seem like bad things: love, respect, appreciation, comfort, order. They're good things in and of themselves. Here's where James 4 helps us. James asks the question, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (4:1). He doesn't say, "Don't they come from *evil* desires?" The word "evil" isn't even in the passage. It says the chaos in our relation-

³ David Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. 27.

ship is caused by something that's happening in our hearts. What is it? It is the fact that desires battle within us. They take the turf of the heart and so establish themselves as the functional and effective rulers of our lives. They replace God's rulership. The problem is not that we desire the love of a husband or wife. The problem is that our hearts are ruled by the desire. Desire becomes demand. Demand gets expressed as a need. Need sets up expectation. Expectation leads to disappointment. Disappointment leads to some aspect of punishment.

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There's the problem in human relationships: desire becomes demand, and demand gets expressed as need. I've never had one of my children say, "Dad, I sort of desire a pair of shoes." What do they always say? "Dad, I NEED a pair of shoes!" That needs sets up expectation, and there's a direct relationship between expectation and disappointment. Disappointment then leads to some aspect of punishment or striking back. It can be anything from the silent treatment to horrendous acts of violence. Have you ever had anybody give you the silent treatment? It's bloodless murder. I'm not going to kill you, but I can act like you don't exist.

You ride in the car with somebody and say:

"You're quiet. Something wrong?"

"Can't a person ever be quiet?"

"I think you're upset."

"I'm not upset. I just feel like being quiet. I don't have anything to say!"

"I think you're mad."

"WHEN I'M MAD, I'LL TELL YOU THAT I'M MAD! IT UPSETS ME THAT YOU'RE ACCUSING ME OF SOMETHING JUST BECAUSE I'M QUIET!"

"I think you're angry."

"I'M NOT ANGRY!!!"

Silent treatment. Punishment. That's what we do. It's from plausible idolatry, things that are perfectly fine to desire. They're part of the good gifts God has given us, but they're never meant to rule us. So instead of realizing the heinous nature of that idolatry, we argue for their plausibility.

The other way in which idolatry is deceptive is that it happens in the midst of ongoing Christianity, in the midst of our faith. A person doesn't wake up in the

morning and say, "I am so tired of being a theist. Theist, theist, theist! I've been a theist since I was a little boy. I think I'll be an atheist. Yes, that's what I'll be." You don't wake up in the morning and say, "I'm tired of the arduousness of biblical ethics. I'm going to forsake the last vestiges of biblical ethics for whatever whim my nature wants to go after." It doesn't happen that way. Instead, we construct idols in the midst of personal devotions and church attendance. In the midst of ministry, we can give our hearts away to other things. We create huge gaps between our confessional theology and our functional theology. The god of Tuesday just happens to be radically different from the God of Sunday.

That's what often happened to Israel. The Lord says, "These people come near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me" (Isa. 29:13). God says, "I cannot bear your evil assemblies; your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts My soul hates" (Isa. 1:13-14). Why does God hate that? Because God wants our *hearts!* He doesn't want ritualistic service: He wants *us*. He's a jealous God, and He demands *us*.

We have seen how idols are deceptive, because they present themselves as plausible, and they can take place in the midst of Christianity. In fact, the only thing a fool is really committed to is himself. He has in himself an essential "*me-olatry*." He is the biggest of his idols. I want to give you this warning. Whenever counseling forgets the idols of the heart and focuses solely on horizontal human problems, needs, and difficulties, then counseling itself becomes part of the problem, not part of the solution. It will tend to strengthen and institutionalize that idolatry. We all have an obsessive commitment to self.

Here is an example. Luella and I like to go out to eat together. We have four children still living with us, ages 23, 21, 18, and 14. We do not have "empty nest syndrome." Our nest is full, and our birds do not fly off; they just bring all their stuff back to the nest. So we like to get away with one another and have time to talk. We have the same tastes and tend to order the same meal at a restaurant. This always happens. We'll order something like chicken breast. When the meals come, I am presented with the breast of an anorectic quail. Luella is presented with the breast of a seriously obese turkey. It has never ever entered my mind to say, "Isn't it wonderful how God has blessed Luella with such abundance!" No, instead, it drives me crazy! I want to say to the waiter, "Are you an idiot? Look at her, look at me. How could you give that portion to her?" The meal is no longer enjoyable to me! Somehow I would love to get her plate in front of me, but I don't want to act as the

cretin that I actually am. So I try to introduce the topic to Luella: "What do you think of the portions?" Do you know what she says? "Look at the size of this! I have enough for today, for Monday's lunch, for Tuesday..." She never says, "Oh, you take my portion. It's way too big for me."

I also love chocolate chip cookies. When they're on the tray, I never think, "I just enjoy watching my family consume the glory of these cookies." There's always one that I have spotted: it's Paul's cookie. No one knows that, but I do. It's the one with the most visible chips. Chocolate chip cookies are not created equal. As the tray is going around, I'm worried that somebody is going to grab my cookie. I've even said, "Hey, that's my cookie!" The family looks at me like, "Are you nuts?"

I'm sitting in traffic, and I think, "Don't they know I have somewhere to go?" What an irrational thought that is! Of course they don't! I want them to say, "Oh, Paul's behind us. Let's drive off the road. It's Paul." Cars part. I say, "Thanks!" They finally got it! This fundamental "me-olatry" is in all of our lives.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that even in our most Godward moment, prayer, we will claim that moment to build our reputation with the people around us. Isn't that amazing? So we rehearse the words first. That's not for God! God hears the rehearsal. "Our most gracious heavenly Father, our loving covenant-keeping most gracious heavenly Father, almighty God..." You can feel it building up within you until you're finally ready to pray. We're taking the most focused Godward act where we speak words to Him that we know He hears, and we're owning it for us to build a reputation with the people around us. *Me-olatry!*: from the little moments of life to the big moments of life. Biblical counseling absolutely must get at that. If you give counsel that does not scratch at that idolatry, you will strengthen it, you will instill it, you will institutionalize it. The little principles you give will be used to serve that idol. If you give wonderful principles of communication to a man who's a controller, what will he do with those principles? He will use those principles to exercise greater control over the people in his life. You have to get at these idols of the heart. David Henderson puts it well:

It is also a great temptation to make Christianity attractive to seekers by misrepresenting the faith as a relationship through Christ with a God who is the divine vending machine in the sky, there to meet every our need. "Unhappy? Unattractive? Unsuccessful? Unmarried? Unfulfilled? Come to Christ, and he'll give you everything you ask for." We forget that God is not primarily in the business of meeting needs....God is in the busi-

ness of being God....God's agenda is...to invite men and women out of the hollow pursuit of living for themselves and into a life consumed by Him...the kind of Christlike individuals with whom God is pleased to spend eternity.⁴

Personal ministry must overturn the felt needs of foolishness, not bow before them.

Principle Five: At the heart of this rescue is not a system of redemption but a living, active Redeemer.

This is a very important point. The Bible presents the work of Christ not simply as correcting our thinking, reorienting our lives, and reconciling our relationships: The Bible presents what Christ is doing as the

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effecting of a rescue. You see, if you are hit by a car and remain lying beside the road with a broken body, you don't need someone to teach you the principles of anatomy and physiology. That's not going to help you. You can never give enough principles to fix what's wrong. Instead, the heart of what we're doing is offering people a Rescuer, and His name is Emmanuel. Jesus is the Rescuer who comes to live with us. He literally unzips us and gets inside of us. It's rescue. It's not a system.

Let me take you back to 1 Corinthians 1 where Paul grabs hold of this.

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (vv. 20-25)

Remember how we defined foolishness above: since the fall, human beings have tried to replace the

⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

Redeemer with systems of redemption. Indeed, we can argue that human systems of help are just that. They are systems of redemption. They fail to inform us that the only help we need is to be rescued by a Redeemer.

This passage in Corinthians gives two examples of replacement systems. First, the Jews looked for a miraculous sign. They demanded experience. Maybe this summarizes the empiricist, the pragmatist, and the scientist as well. Let me take it into a laboratory. Let me

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test it. Let me personally experience it. Let me measure it. Let me quantify it. Wisdom will come that way.

On the other hand, the Greeks demanded wisdom. That amounts to replacing the Redeemer with a philosophical system. There's the philosopher, the psychologist, and the sociologist. Give me a logical argument, and I'll get wisdom.

Remember these words: "I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life." That's Jesus. We believe something very radical: truth is not an outline, but a *person*, and His name is Jesus. So I can't replace Him with the best of science. I can't replace Him with the best of logic, even theo-logic. I can't replace Him with ethics. He is irreplaceable. At the heart of our need for rescue is not a system, but a Person, a Redeemer. The most important encounter in counseling is that person's encounter with Christ. As counselors, we are literally here to set up that encounter.

Principle Six: We find wisdom as we submit to and trust in Him.

Colossians 2 contains two radical Christological claims. First, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ (v. 3). Paul says that the key to knowing, understanding, and figuring out the universe, your identity, and your relationships is *Christ*. Christ is the hermeneutic of life. You can't understand life without Christ. Any attempt to look at life through anything but the lens of Christ will result in distortion.

Second, the key to human functioning is Christ (v. 9: "For in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form"). Sin empties us; we don't have what it takes. We fall short. Therefore, we can only find fullness and ability in Christ. In between these two claims—Christ is

the key to all knowing and all functioning—Paul gives a warning. Hear this: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (v. 8). Paul is saying, "Watch out! Don't be tricked by depending on human philosophy which would say that knowing and doing can be found outside of Christ. That philosophy is deceptive. It won't deliver because it does not depend on Christ." What a powerful passage! The key to wisdom is not knowing everything God knows, or memorizing the entire Bible, or mastering theology, or divining the secret will of God so I can figure Him out and know what He's going to do next. The key to wisdom is, rather, an active, practical, functional reliance on Christ. Wise people take their reliance on Christ to everything they do: work, marriage, and their understanding of their own identity.

This submission to Christ is captured in Scripture by three dominant biblical themes. To give you a full picture—the big picture—I want to lay out each theme, the principle underlying it, and the call that proceeds from it.

- (1) The first theme: Christ is sovereign.
The principle: Christ is in immanent control.
The call: Rest in Him.
- (2) The second theme: Christ is gracious.
The principle: Christ has an abundant supply.
The call: Rely on Him.
- (3) The third theme: Christ is worthy of glory.
The principle: Christ calls us to a higher agenda.
The call: Submit to Him.

These three themes and principles give the big picture: it's all about Jesus Christ. This threefold call captures the life of wisdom. A wise person rests in Christ's control, relies on His grace, and lives for His glory.

Let's look more closely at the first theme: Christ's sovereignty. When Paul was in Athens, he saw people doing homage to an idol. He says,

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:24-27)

Do you get the principle? It's the principle of immanent

sovereignty. God has ruled His world in such a way that He is in every one of our experiences. Why has He chosen to do that? So that, at any given moment, we can reach out and touch Him, because He's not far from any one of us. This way of thinking about sovereignty differs from that perception of a distant God who is almost unreachable and moves chessmen around at His will. Instead, the picture here is of a God who, because of His sovereignty, is available to us. If I understand the presence and the personal nature of that control, why would I ever live for my own control? Why would I give in to the lie that my life is out of order, that my life is a pocket of chaos? Let's be honest: we don't understand what God is doing. People say to me all the time in counseling, "What do you think God is doing in my life?" My most theological answer is, "I don't have a clue! I can tell you who He is because He reveals that. I can tell you the kinds of things He does because He reveals that. But I sit as confused as you are." But I have to hold onto this. Literally, he determines the exact place where people live and the exact length of their days. He is in intimate, personal control of the details so that at any moment we can reach out and touch Him. It's sovereign availability. What a precious truth that is. Brothers and sisters, if you get hold of the glory of that, then any attempts at human control by manipulation, guilt, deceit, power-taking, shame, aggression, or logic are insane! These things do not establish control of what's going on around you or make you safe.

Luella and I sometimes have tension on vacations because of me. I like knowing where we're going, I like knowing all the places, and I like thinking about all the things we can do. My idea of a vacation is to see all the places I can see in that locality in the amount of time we have. Luella might say, "What do you think about Tuesday?" I say, "I already have it planned. I know exactly what we ought to do." On one of our very first vacations, we stayed in Philadelphia at my sister's house. I was so excited! It was on vacation. I woke Luella up at six-thirty in the morning. If looks could kill, I wouldn't be here! I was thinking, "We're in a wonderful city, one of the wombs of America. We have things to do!" But Luella's idea of a vacation is that it doesn't start until afternoon. It's relaxation, it's ease. I want her to say to me, "Great idea, Paul, yeah, that's what we'll do." Vacation is my plan and Luella's agreement. That's my definition of vacation. We've learned how to make this work. When we go on vacations now, Luella is happy, and I'm happy; I just see more. She says, "That's fine. Just don't wake me up till" I've gotten used to that. God forgive us for forgetting His sovereignty and living for control. That's what a fool does. A fool lives to establish power. A fool glories in his own control. He

cheats and manipulates and does whatever he can do to get it because he believes the lie that safety is found there. Who do we think we are?

Here's another example. I was standing in Northern India, at a slum in New Delhi. This was supposed to be one of the "better" slums—but in many ways conditions were unspeakable. I stood looking at a little boy leaning against the cot in which his infirmed mom was

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that He is in every one of our experiences.*

laying. He would have been a beautiful child, were it not for his distended stomach, sunken eyes, and fly-infested face. It exploded into my brain that I could be this little boy. Yet I had been raised in one of the most lavishly wealthy nations in the history of humanity. I have known every convenience. I was raised in a family where, although it was not a perfect family, I was read Scripture every morning for my entire childhood. I've never really known much of suffering.

It hit me. This is all about God. The *essence* of my life has nothing to do with my decisions. It has to do with things God has made that have structured my life radically. All of a sudden, attempts at human control to make my life what I think it's supposed to be, paled into non-existence. We *can* rest because God is in control.

The second theme is God's grace in Christ. The fundamental teaching of Scripture about our identity is that it is totally impossible for us to measure up. We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). We are grace-needy. We are grace-dependent. I cannot be what I'm supposed to be, and I cannot do what I'm supposed to do apart from God's grace. The truth of Scripture is: where sin abounds, grace abounds even more (Rom. 5:20). This grace forgives, delivers, restores, reconciles, enables, empowers, and illumines. What does a person who struggles need? He needs forgiveness, deliverance, restoration, reconciliation, power, and insight. Where does he get that? Grace, grace, grace. That's what Jesus died for and lives for! So the crescendo of the New Testament builds in 2 Peter 1, where Peter stands and says, "His divine power has given us *everything* we need for life and godliness" (v. 3). Notice the tense of the verb. His divine power *has given*. The tense of the verb is the perfect: a definitive action in the past, with continuing results into the future. He has given us not only eternal life, but also

godliness. What is godliness? It's a God-pleasing life from the time I come to Christ to the time I go to be with Him. The conflict in the kitchen? There's grace for that moment. The rebellious teenager who looks me in the face and spits back those words? There's grace for that moment. Watching the dream of your marriage fall through your hands like sand? There's grace for that moment. Horrendous acts of personal abuse against you? There's grace for that moment. For all the things

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that I didn't get from my parents? There's grace for that moment. That's the gospel. Brothers and sisters, understand this: you will never with words give to a person what Christ's grace can give. You can't say words over an abused person to make him walk away and forget. But the grace of Christ will heal and deliver and restore and reconcile and enable and illumine. It's His grace. In the words of Corrie Ten Boom, "There is no pit so deep that Jesus isn't deeper." There is no human experience that is so tragic and so deep that it is beyond the depth of the grace of Jesus Christ. He reaches to the deepest point, and, when He gets there, He has more than enough to give us.

What does the wise man do in response? The wise man is not afraid of his inability, because he knows that Christ's grace is sufficient. However, the wise man is afraid of the delusions of human strength, because those delusions will keep him from seeking the grace of Christ. The wise man can glory in weakness because he knows of the sufficiency of Christ. The wise man is approachable, able to be corrected. The wise man is humble, waking up every morning saying, "I am a person of great need. Thank you, Lord, that you are in my life. There's hope for me."

The fool hates weakness. The fool doesn't need grace because he keeps telling himself that he is able. In order to convince himself that he's able, he erects a human second-best standard that he can meet. That's what legalism does. Legalism, in rejecting grace, erects a human second-best standard that I can keep. That's the standard of the Pharisees. Christ said, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). It was bogus

righteousness. Jesus said, "You have forsaken the true law. You have erected your own standards. Of course you can keep them! You thought of them yourselves." Do you know how the disciples responded when Jesus said that? The disciples came to Jesus and said, "You know, Lord, I think you offended the Pharisees." Bingo! He meant to offend them! They had done a heinous thing. They had distilled the law down to 633 keepable commands. What the law actually was meant to do was deliver us to Christ, because the law screams, "You're not able!" Sure, I can share a toy. But I can't love the person who is walking away with it. Right? I can be thankful for the blessing that has been given to me, but it's hard for me to be thankful when you have more. The fool hates grace and believes the delusion of his own ability, and blames everything outside of himself for any wrong that appears in his life. It's the situation, it's other people, it's my past, it's my physical body, it's life in the fallen world, it's misunderstanding, it's my digestive tract. It's anything I can marshal that says it's something other than me.

The final theme is God's glory in Christ. The whole movement of life is toward God. "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory" (Rom. 11:36). The thing God is most committed to is His own glory. I love how human behavior is captured by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. "Let your light so shine before men that they would see your good works and glorify your father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14-16). What's the motivation for human behavior there? A better marriage? A promotion at work? People who like you? The motivation for human behavior is intensely theocentric. It's intensely Christ-oriented. It's intensely evangelistic. I should live the way I live because it's my prayer that somehow, some way, the words, thoughts, and behavior of this weak man would point to the glory of the Lord. So I hope that in some way I am a little light that shines light toward the glory of God. I realize if there is any good in word or thought or deed, or if there is any good in desire or motive, it's because of Him who is in me. God, make us wise. Teach us to submit.

Here's the wise man. The wise man knows that the only true path to human blessing is to walk down the road of the glory of God. The fool lives for his own glory—my way, my time, my agenda, my thoughts. There's no voice I'd rather hear than my own. There's no story I'd rather hear told than my own. There's no argument more eloquent than my own. There's no time more important to me than my own. There's no schedule I'm more committed to than my own. It's my own, my own, my own.

Scripture calls us to very specific obedience in sub-

mitting our lives to Christ's glory. The conflict in the kitchen? There are how-tos of peacemaking that Christ will help you live out. The rebellious teen who spits back words? When you are reviled, the Holy Spirit enables you not to revile in return, but to give a gentle

*Encourage people to find their
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answer. The disintegrating marriage? The Bible teaches us how to humble ourselves for our own failings, how to forgive others, how to love even enemies. Experiences of abuse and neglect? The psalms lead you to refuge. You, too, can go there. Submit to Christ's glory, not your own, and He will disciple you into His image and lifestyle.

Conclusion

So, what do I think is the purpose of biblical counseling? To bring counselees into rest, reliance, and submission to Christ, to help them grow wise. Counseling rests on these three things. First, the theme of Christ's sovereignty, the principle of immanent control, and a call to rest. Second, the theme of Christ's grace, the principle of abundant supply, and a call to rely. Third, the theme of Christ's glory, the principle of a higher agenda, and a call to submit. When we counsel, rather than give people just principles to tweak their lives, we need instead to call them to make definitive risks of faith. We ought to say to them: "Let go of that control you've tried to have over everybody in your life. Trust the sovereignty of your Lord." We ought to say: "Let go of those patterns of self-reliance and self-righteousness and rely on the grace of your Lord." We ought to say: "Quit living for your own glory. Look how it has destroyed your relationships. Submit to the glory of Christ." Our goal is to say: "Won't you place your life

in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ? There alone is found wisdom. Rest in His sovereignty, rely on His grace, submit to His glory. He will change your life. If you bring these three themes to your parenting, your work, your marriage, or any other context of human life, it will radically change what's going on there." Why do we counsel? What is our purpose? To rescue fools. Encourage people to find their wisdom in the Lord.

"A Hymn on Spruce Street," written by James Montgomery Boice, the late Pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, PA, captures it all.

How marvelous, how wise, how great,
How infinite to contemplate
Jehovah's saving plan.
He saw me in my lost estate,
Yet He purposed to regenerate,
This faithless, fallen man.
For known before the world began,
According to His gracious plan,
God destined I would be
Conformed to Jesus Christ.
The man who lived and loved
As no man can.
What a glorious decree.
He bore my sin on Calvary's tree,
He righteousness bestowed on me,
That I might see His face.
God justified me, set me free,
And glorified I soon will be.
How marvelous His grace!
What have I now but to embrace,
This God who saved me from disgrace,
And love Him evermore.
And with contentment run my race,
My eyes fixed ever on His face,
To praise Him and adore.

That is a life of wisdom. That is rescuing fools. May God give you skill in doing that with the people He places in your pathway.