

"They Are Blind Guides"

Today will be our last sermon in our short mini-series on Biblical Counseling. I know we've not covered this subject in great detail, but I hope this short series has sparked more intentional reflection on how we counsel others. To help stimulate further reflection on this subject, our Thursday night study will begin in September a book study through a book called "Ready to Restore." This is a book by Jay Adams, basically on lay counseling. If you'd like to order a book, please sign up on the back.

So let's recap what we've covered in this series on Biblical Counseling. Our first message called every Christian to aspire to grow in their ability to biblically counsel one another. Our second message talked about the importance of gathering adequate data before you give out any counsel. Our third message talked about how we grow and change biblically, to be used in counseling. Last week's message talked about the processes given in Scripture for confronting various sins and offenses, and how that relates to biblical counseling.

In today's message I'd like to turn now and think about some of the common temptations you need to be aware of when you biblically counsel someone. I'm not talking about temptations in the person you're counseling. I'm talking about temptations in yourself. Scripture is very clear on this. Whenever you admonish our counsel anyone, there are temptations that you will face. We need to be aware of these and on guard against them. You see, we've had this mini-series on counseling, so we can grow to become better counselors. If we're not on guard against these common temptations, we run the risk of actually being bad counselors. In fact, we see that in this passage. Jesus calls the Pharisees "blind guides;" the blind leading the blind. We don't want to be blind guides. So today, we'll consider some common temptations to us when counseling and guiding others.

Let's consider first today why Jesus calls the Pharisees blind guides, and how that's an important general warning to us in biblical counseling. Jesus calls the Pharisees this in verse 14, but it's in response to what happened earlier in this chapter. This chapter begins in verses 1-2 when we see the scribes and Pharisees confronting Jesus with a theological complaint. Jesus' disciples, and presumably Jesus himself, weren't keeping the elders' tradition of ceremonial hand washing. Jesus' basic response is that the Pharisees are elevating man-made rules as if they were God's laws. Verse 9 is Jesus' description of them, "Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." That's Jesus' initial response to them. The Pharisees' complaint about the hand washing was wrong from the start, because they were treating some requirement man had invented as if it was doctrine from God. But, of course, it wasn't. No place in the Bible had God required the washing that they were demanding.

But Jesus goes on to further critique them. Not only were they wrong in adding to God's laws, but the very thing they added was inherently flawed. That's what Jesus says in verse 11. Jesus says that it's not what goes into a man that makes him unclean, but what comes out of a man. This is actually a parable or a metaphor by Jesus. Jesus goes on to explain to his disciples what he's talking about. He's basically saying that the Pharisees had the wrong focus. The Pharisees were looking for external, physical, purity. Jesus was concerned with internal, spiritual, purity. Jesus says that's where real defilement comes from in humans. Jesus says when humans sin, it comes from the heart. Out of the inner man comes

sin. Our real problem doesn't lie in what we physically consume. Our real problem is sin, and that comes from a depraved sinful nature. It comes from sick and hardened hearts. Jesus says the Pharisees were treating the wrong thing. Our souls need spiritual help, more than our bodies need physical nourishment.

The Pharisees should have been spiritual guides, but in reality they were blind guides. They were leading others in the wrong way. And this came ultimately from their own inner state. The surface level problem with the Pharisees is that they taught man-made ideas and they addressed physical purity. But the real problem for them was actually a heart problem as well. Verse 8. Jesus said that their hearts were far from God. And so in some sense the Pharisees were blind guides because they didn't counsel from the Bible. They were blind guides because they counseled on physical issues instead of spiritual ones. But the root of why they were blind guides, is because they were spiritually blind themselves. They were lost. They weren't real followers of God. They weren't born again. They therefore didn't understand the things of God. They weren't saved themselves.

In other words, their spiritual blindness meant they were darkened in their understanding. This meant they couldn't see to understand their real problems, let alone to help others. They couldn't see to understand God's Word, or Jesus' parables. They couldn't see to understand that sin comes from a depraved heart. They couldn't see to understand they and others needed heart change. They needed real heart change first themselves. Then they could see to help others.

This is a serious problem for them. It was a serious problem for whomever was led by them. Verse 14. Jesus says they will only lead others into a pit. This is a parable of course too. People who are physically blind will lead other physically blind people into danger. Blind people need people who can see to lead them into safety. This is a parable about physical blindness to teach a spiritual lesson. Guides and counselors and shepherds must themselves have been granted spiritual sight, so they can see to help others in their spiritual needs.

This is true for us today. If our guides and counselors are not really Christian, we don't want to have them leading us. We shouldn't follow blind guides. This reminds us to have discernment when we receive counsel on spiritual matters. We should look for Biblical counsel from real Christians.

As for how this applies to us who desire to be good biblical counselors, this of course means that we have to be Christians ourselves. We have to have experienced the heart changing work of Christ's grace through faith before we can counsel others. The light of Christ needs to have enlivened our spiritual eyesight so we can see to help others. In other words, if we are to not be blind guides, we must be a real believer. If we are not to be blind guides, we must be truly born again. We must be a true Christian that can say, I once was blind but now I see, all by God's amazing grace!

Now this application may be a bit obvious to some, so let me then take this a step further. The Pharisee's spiritual blindness led them to give bad counsel. If we are a Christian, it should lead us to give good counsel. The Pharisees couldn't see to understand and use God's Word in their counsel. They instead counseled from man-made ideas; teaching the tradition of the elders as if it were the doctrines of God. That's where their spiritual blindness led them. Where should our spiritual sight lead us then, when we counsel others?

Simply put, we see in this passage that it should lead us to two things. First, it should lead us to counsel from God's Word. Spiritual sight will show us that God's Word has the answers. Spiritual sight will show us that God's word is lamp to our

feet and a light to our path (Ps 119:105). Spiritual sight will show us that this is the light we and others must use in our spiritual walk. And this is very important: spiritual sight will enable us to understand God's Word. Spiritual sight includes not only a changed heart, but an ability to begin to truly understand God's Word. Notice that's what Jesus tells the disciples in verse 16 after they ask about the parable. He says to them, "Are you also still without understanding?" There seems to be some sort of comparison between the disciples and the Pharisees here. Some aspect of the Pharisee's spiritual blindness appears here with the disciples. That's why they didn't understand the parable. In verse 17, Jesus again challenges them with their need to understand the parable. Of course, Jesus explains it to them. That's the difference between the disciples and the Pharisees. The Pharisees heard Jesus' words and left offended and still blind. The disciples seek to understand Jesus' words, and he explains the parable to them. The disciples come away from this growing to know God's Word better through Jesus teaching them. The disciples' spiritual sight is improving as they hang out with Jesus. My point then is that if we have been given spiritual sight from Christ, then that should lead us to both understand God's Word and to counsel from it.

The second thing that our spiritual sight should lead us to do, is to counsel toward the heart. Our spiritual sight should lead us to counsel so as to address the heart. The Pharisees didn't do this. They were consumed with outward change. But, Jesus in verses 18-20 tells us that the heart should be our focus. That's why he said that it's out of the heart that proceed the long list of sins in verse 19. He's still contrasting the bad counsel of the Pharisees from the good counsel. Counseling toward outward religiosity is vain religion. We need to have a spiritual focus in our counsel of others. We want to guide ourselves and others in spiritual matters. Matters that start in the heart; in our inward man. Of course, this especially means bringing people to Jesus who changes hearts.

So far we've learned from this passage some important ways we can be a good counselor, instead of a bad counselor. I want to continue to do this now by thinking of some more specific sins that Christians may be tempted to fall into when they counsel others. Last week when we read Galatians 6, we were reminded that when we counsel and admonish others, it's very easy to fall into temptation ourselves. We also mentioned Matthew 7 that warns about getting the plank out of your own eye before helping others with the speck in their eye. That's the same sort of concern. If we are going to be spiritual guides and counselors of others, we need to look to our own hearts first. If we're going to counsel others about heart issues, we need to be aware of our own heart issues first. And when counseling others, there are some specific heart issues that typically come up for counselors. I'm thinking of things like slander, gossip, and meddling. Those are the words we use in English, though the Greek has a number of related words that get at these sins of slander, gossip, and meddling. So, I want to spend some time thinking about these common temptations of the heart for counselors in the remainder of our sermon today.

We see some of these sins listed right here in verse 19. Jesus tells us they are heart issues. The two I have specifically in mind from this list, are the last two. "False witness" and "blasphemies". In biblical language, the word witness can be used a little more broadly than in English. For example, Deuteronomy 19:16 describes false witnesses rising against someone to accuse them. In other words, witnesses in the Bible aren't always just impartial people giving their side of the story, but can also be the people making the accusations. It's okay in the right context to make accusations or give witness. We talked about the right context and process last week; the due processes for handling sins and offenses in Scripture. But even if you're following the right process, it's a sin if what you are saying

is false. Your testimony or accusation against someone is sinful if it's not actually true; even if you believe it's true.

This word for blasphemies in verse 19 is closely related. We often think of the word blasphemy as something only directed toward God. But the word in Greek doesn't apply to just God. In the Greek language you can blaspheme both humans and God. That's why most modern translations often translate this word in verse 19 simply as "slander." Basically this word in the Greek for blasphemies is a very broad word for any sort of denigrating or defaming speech against someone. Speech like this is usually things that are both negative and untrue which are then publically spoken. This is closely related to the false witness, though false witness might have a more formal and legal context to it, whereas blasphemies might have a more general aspect to it. False witness might be speaking wrong things about someone, while following the correct due processes accorded for someone in Scripture. Blasphemies, or slander, would be speaking wrong things against someone in general, generally outside the due processes of Scripture.

2 Corinthians 12:20 gives us some similar Greek words that are closely related to these sins of false witness and blasphemy. There you see the words in the NKJV of backbitings and whisperings. More simply, slander and gossip. The word in 2 Corinthians 12:20 for backbitings, or slander, is a close synonym of the word for blasphemy here in Matthew 18. It basically means you are going around talking evil against a person to others. This other word in 2 Corinthians 12:20, whisperings, or gossip, has a more private connotation. Often, it can be essentially secret slander. It's slandering the person behind closed doors. This word for whisperings can also be translated tale-bearing as well. It can involve telling harmful information about the person that's private; that they didn't want others to know about.

A more distantly related sin is that of meddling or being a busybody. Being a busybody or a meddler is essentially injecting yourself in situation in an inappropriate way. It's taking on someone else's business or concerns in unrighteous ways. It's making everyone else's business your business. It often involves the person going and looking for problems to solve, but in the process overstepping biblical boundaries. The Bible is pretty clear why this ends up happening. It usually ends up happening because you have too much free time on your hands. 2 Thessalonians 3:11 says that when you are not busy with your own work, that you'll be tempted to be busy in everyone else's business. 1 Timothy 5:13 gives a similar example of widows who have too much free time on their hands, who go about from house to house, involving themselves too much in others' affairs. What's interesting about that passage in 1 Timothy 5:13 is that it connects gossip with being a busybody. That's why I mentioned there's a connection of being a busybody with gossip and slander. What usually happens is the busybody injects themselves in someone's problems, then goes around to others gossiping and slandering. Sometimes they even presumptuously act on someone else's behalf, without their permission. All of this is usually done under a righteous guise; so and so has these problem that we need to solve for them. But the bible condemns meddling in this way.

Apply all of this to our counseling. In counseling, we have to be on our guard against these interrelated temptations. False Accusations, slander, gossip, meddling can all be interrelated. Each of these can tempt us to sin against the person who we're intending to help and counsel. All of these sins can in one way or another lead to unjustly damaging our brother's name. These sins can rob him or her from the protections offered us in Scripture.

Let's face it, these are some of the most socially acceptable sins in a church. Often they are committed with the most noble of intentions. We think we are helping someone. Often we don't even realize we are committing one of these sins. But look at the list of sins verse 19 includes with these: murder, adultery, fornication, theft. These forms of slander are grouped with some other very serious sins. We see something similar in 1 Peter 4:15 with regard to being a busybody. It says, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters." How quick when we counsel someone we can end up slandering, gossiping, falsely accusing, and meddling. And yet the bible groups these sins with some other very serious sins. These sins are very destructive. God hates these sins. Yet, we can so quickly fall into them, even with the best of intentions.

Here's one way we can fall into them with good intentions. We can be counseling someone, and make too quick of a judgment. We can assume too much. We can make judgments without hearing out all sides to a story. We can then start making accusations about the person. We might genuinely believe they are correct. Then later it might be shown that we weren't correct. Our opinions of a matter can be proven false. Just because you have an opinion doesn't give you the right to go around stating it as fact. In other words, we can slander someone and falsely accuse someone and think we are speaking the truth. We need to guard ourselves against this. There's a reason the bible warns us so much about making judgments against our neighbors. One common false accusation we can make is we can assume someone's motive; but unless they told you their motive, we can't read their heart.

Another way we can fall into these sins with good intentions is at prayer meetings. We share a prayer request about someone that essentially is gossip. Prayers meetings don't make gossip acceptable. The same often happens in private conversations. You share something to someone and tell them you are sharing a concern you have for someone, and ask that it be kept in confidence. Then you proceed to gossip about the person. Just saying that you have a spiritual concern for someone doesn't make it not gossip. Just telling someone to keep it in confidence, doesn't make it not gossip. Just because you mention it in a prayer request, doesn't make it not gossip. Don't disclose private information about others, that they wouldn't want you to be sharing. If there's any doubt, don't share it. If there's any doubt, get their permission before you turn it into a prayer request. When we counsel someone, this is all the more tempting, because we might feel overwhelmed by the person's situation, and want to bring others inappropriately into it. We make religious sounding reasons then to gossip. Resist this temptation.

Last week we talked about the processes we should follow when we encounter sins and offenses. None of these processes involve us acting as a busybody proactively looking for trouble. None of these processes involve slander or gossip. Each of those processes establishes boundaries that we ought to guard in how and when we give counsel. Each of these processes establish when and how we should involve others in any matter. Each of these processes involve speaking concerns directly to the person, not behind their back.

So when we counsel, let's be on guard against slander, gossip, and meddling. Let us instead look to speak truth. Let us look to speak positive things to others. Let us look to confront others, when needed, according to the processes of Scripture. Realize, I'm not advocating privacy for privacy's sake. In fact, I'm not advocating absolute privacy at all. The Bible doesn't advocate absolute privacy or confidentiality. I'm advocating Biblical confidentiality and privacy. Don't reveal things or intervene in matters, except following the patterns of Scripture. If there's doubt on what process or pattern we should follow on a

matter, ask your pastor or elder, and we'll do our best to advise you to the right course of action.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, at the end of the day, we want to be good guides to others. When we find ourselves having an opportunity to counsel others, we don't want to be blind guides. If we are Christian, we won't be blind guides; and yet sometimes we can end up counseling like blind guides. As those who've had their hearts changed by Christ, let's counsel others to keep going to Christ. Let's keep guiding people back to Christ, the Great Physician. Let's keep guiding those who need heart change to the one who can change hearts. That means we bring people to Christ, and we bring people to the words of Christ, i.e. the Scriptures. That means we pray for people that the Spirit of Christ would be at work in their lives. That's the kind of guides we want to be. As those who have been given sight to see Christ, let him guide others through us. Let's be used by Christ as guides to Christ.

If you're feeling at all overwhelmed at the difficulties and temptations involved when biblically counseling people, let me encourage you. We see in this passage that the disciples had a bit of spiritual ignorance that resembled the blind guides of the Pharisees. They had trouble understanding and applying Christ's words. They didn't fully "see" the point Jesus was making. They weren't seeing clearly yet to be able to guide others effectively. And yet we know Christ today because of them. We know Christ today because Christ guided us to himself, through their ministry. God was guiding the disciples so that one day they'd be able to guide others. We benefit from the ministry of the disciples today. So that's my encouragement. If you're feeling unprepared and intimidated at the prospect of counseling others from the Scriptures, be encouraged by what God did in the disciples. Jesus grew their spiritual vision. He can grow you too. What God did in the disciples to equip them for service, is what he will continue to be doing to you.

Let us keep being guided by the Spirit of Christ in our life; keep following Christ through his Word. Christ may use other Christians as part of how he guides us. As Christ guides us in life, he'll be using us at times to guide others as well. As Christ guides us, he'll be working real spiritual growth and heart change in us. And he'll begin to use us as his instruments in other people's lives as well.

And so, if you feel intimidated at all to counsel others from the Word, there's a healthy sense there. We should not trust in ourselves. We should be eager to grow as good guides. We should be eager to keep pointing people to Christ and his Word. But maybe that also encourages us. Our job is not to change hearts. If it was, we should be intimidated. We just keep helping people to connect via faith and repentance with Christ who does change hearts. If we abide in Christ in all of this, he will do great things in us. Apart from him we can do nothing. Take heart, that as we point people to Christ, he will do great things in both us and them. Amen.

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