

"Able Also to Admonish One Another"

Today we're going to take a break from our series from Deuteronomy for about a month. Based on a number of recent discussions and observations I've been having with members in the congregation, I thought it would be helpful to think through a few specific topics. And we're going to do that in the context of the larger subject of counseling. Specifically lay counseling; counseling done not just by the pastors and elders, but the kind of counseling that every member in the church ought to aspire to do. In our sermon today, we're going to think about this from a big picture. We're going to consider how every Christian ought to look to grow in their ability to counsel others by the Word of God. In the weeks to come our sermons will deal with some specific issues that come up in that sort of counseling. Like how to help others in the midst of a conflict. How to advise on the process of reconciliation. To think through what forgiveness looks like. To be aware of the sorts of temptations that are common for the counselors as they give counsel. So that's the general plan for the next few weeks.

Today we want to focus on counseling in general, and how it's something we should all aspire to be competent to perform. Let's begin by defining the kind of counseling we are talking about. In general, I'm referring to biblical counseling. Giving counsel that comes from the Bible. More specifically, I'm going to be talking today about "Nouthetic Counseling." You may or may not be familiar with that terminology: "Nouthetic Counseling." Nouthetic Counseling is basically just biblical counseling, but the discipline was more formally developed by the Reformed minister and author Dr. Jay Adams. It's a widely accepted and appreciated discipline, being utilized not just by Reformed ministers, but taught and cultivated across many evangelical denominations and seminaries. It's the same school of thought that Rev. Kevin Kirby counsels from, for example, at his counseling center in Petaluma. Though the name might sound a bit intimidating, however, as I said it's basically just promoting giving counsel from the Bible. The label came in the 70s based on some books by Jay Adams, but the discipline doesn't claim to do anything that the church hasn't been doing from the beginning: giving counsel from the Bible.

But I do bring up the name "Nouthetic Counseling" in order to help us think about what biblical counseling involves and to tie us in with our passage for today. You see the word "nouthetic" is a Greek word. It's the word that appears in verse 14 of our passage for today translated in the NKJV as "admonish." The actual word in Greek is a bit difficult to translate into English. Three common translations of this Greek word are admonish, instruct, and warn. Sometimes the word is even translated as "counsel." Basically the idea of this Greek word *noutheteo* is to counsel someone about avoiding or stopping some improper course of conduct (BDAG). This is what Jay Adams basically says biblical counseling is. It's what described by this word *noutheteo* in the Greek. It's instruction that calls someone toward Biblical change, looking for Christian growth in their life. In the words of Jay Adams, "Nouthetic counseling consists of lovingly confronting people out of deep concern in order to help them make those changes that God requires."

I mentioned that this Greek word is often translated as "instruct". Sometimes you'll see it even translated as "teach." Well, in the Greek there is another word that clearly means "teach." That's the Greek word *didaskalos*. In the Greek Word, if you are just talking about education and instruction, that's the word you would use. In contrast, though the word *noutheteo* has a connotation of teaching, it's

teaching that looks for change. It's teaching that corrects and admonishes. In other words, the instruction implied in the word *noutheteo* has a specific goal: to call the person to some change in their life. In other words, biblical counseling of this sort is not just providing instruction and teaching. It's providing targeted instruction, that's addressing specific areas of change needed in someone's life. This type of counseling is not just academic in nature. It get's personal and real. Jay Adams says this sort of counseling involves confrontation, it involves concern, and it involves change.

And so this is the word we see here in verse 15. Essentially it's what's being discussed in this verse. It's a word and concept seen in several New Testament passages. Of course, it's just a word. What's more important is the concept of biblical counseling that's embodied by this word, and described in many ways throughout the Bible, well beyond just a single word.

And so when we talk about this type of counseling, realize that it's implied here in this passage that this is *biblical* counseling. What I mean is that the admonition and instruction in view here is biblical admonition and instruction. When you counsel someone in this way, you are lovingly confronting them on areas of change in their life. However, this loving confrontation doesn't just come from your own good ideas. It chiefly and primarily comes from the Bible. I believe this is what's implied and in view in the greater context of this passage. Certainly it's what's clearly seen as you read the Bible on how Christians are to admonish one another. It's never just on man-made ideas or wisdom. Remember 2 Timothy 3:16. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." The sort of counsel and admonition and instruction that we are talking about today is counsel that comes from the Bible.

This is of course one of the main things that separates biblical counseling from the world's counsel. The world has various ideas on counseling. Sometimes, by God's common grace, the world's wisdom sounds very similar to ideas you read in the Bible. Sometimes, that's even where they got them. Other times, the world's ideas on counseling are very far from Scripture. Often they directly contradict Scripture. In God's common grace, sometimes the world's counseling ideas can be helpful and useful. Sometimes they are not, and actually work against the Biblical principles. I'm not going to tell you today to ignore and disregard making use of secular wisdom. But if you utilize the world's wisdom, you have to use great discernment. You see that's the difference between the wisdom from the world and the wisdom from the Bible. The world's wisdom is fallible. The Bible is infallible. If our counsel comes from Scripture, we know we can trust it.

As you hear me describing biblical counseling today, you might notice that a lot of it sounds like what happens in a sermon. In a sermon, you have teaching and instruction. But hopefully a sermon also has application. A sermon should drive home the point of the passage in a way that lovingly confronts us with the truth of Scripture. Application in a sermon will challenge us to live by God's grace in accordance to the Word. A good sermon will especially drive home how the gospel applies to all our living. Well, there's good reason why a sermon might sound like biblical counseling. In a sense, biblical counseling is somewhat like private preaching. What a minister does in the pulpit is instructing and exhorting all on a general level. Biblical counseling then takes the Scriptures and applies them to someone on a personal level for their personal needs.

Of course, that means that if in the sermon we need to always and especially emphasize the gospel, that means our biblical counseling needs to always and especially emphasize the gospel. We don't just preach the law in our sermons. We

preach the gospel of God's grace that transforms sinners into saints. We proclaim that out our gratitude for what Christ has done for us, we are spurred on to godly living. We proclaim that it's the power of Christ at work in us that fuels our Christian growth. All of this especially needs to come out in our biblical counseling on a one-on-one level. As much as we biblically counsel people toward godly change, we need to biblically counsel people with the gospel and how that's foundational for all true growth and change.

So that's a bit of a very broad summary of what biblical counseling is all about. Let me now make a brief case that this is something we should all aspire to be able to do and to do well. Verse 14. "Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." Note that last part. "Able to admonish one another." In other words, able to nouthetically counsel one another. Paul could speak generally enough about this entire church to say that these brethren were capable to be doing this. They were capable to counsel.

You have other passages in the New Testament that also use this same word, *noutheteo*, in a way that shows that Christians in general ought to be doing this. Colossians 3:16, for example says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." The word admonish there again is this word for nouthetic counseling; here the church as a whole is told to be doing this. There are other passages that command Christians in general to admonish brothers on certain sins, again using this same word in the Greek. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and 2 Thessalonians 3:15 are two more example passages you could look up on your own and see this.

In other words, the Scriptures see that we should expect all believers to have opportunity and ability to biblically counsel others; in this sense of instruction and admonition from God's Word. Going back to verse 14 here, we learn a little bit about how the Christians in Rome were competent to counsel. Verse 14 gives two statements that are related to their competency to counsel. It says they are full of goodness, and that they are full of knowledge. These are important qualifications to have in being able to effectively counsel.

Certainly we can understand the knowledge aspect. If you are going to counsel from the Scripture, you need to know the Scriptures. The more knowledgeable on the Scriptures you are, in many ways you'll be more equipped to counsel. Yet, Paul also pairs this knowledge with goodness. These Christians at Rome were full of goodness, and that was related to their competency to council. This is a broad statement, and makes you think broadly about the sort of attitude and character a biblical counselor should have when counseling someone. It surely talks of the counselor's own pursuit of godliness. It surely says that the counselor has a genuine care and interest for the person they would admonish. It would mean that the counselor would approach a person with great love and kindness when they instruct and admonish them. Both of these are essential aspects for a Christian counselor. They need to be full both of knowledge and goodness as they seek to counsel others. Knowledge and goodness according to the Bible and the Bible's standards, of course.

The passage I just read from Colossians, Colossians 3:16, also told of another related qualification for effective counseling. It said to let the word of God dwell in you richly in all wisdom. Wisdom is the proper application of knowledge for the circumstances at hand. Biblical counseling will be most effective when the counselor wisely handles his knowledge of Bible, in all goodness, for the particular situation.

So again, Paul commends the Roman Christians here as being able to counsel. How did they become able to counsel? How did they gain this competency? Well, the passage here doesn't tell us. It's not explicitly stated. Ultimately, it's something that comes from the Holy Spirit. It's something that Holy Spirit does inside us. The Holy Spirit renews us in the image of God that we could grow in knowledge, and goodness, and wisdom. The Holy Spirit opens up our minds to understand the Word of God. But of course, the Bible repeatedly shows us how the Holy Spirit works through means. The means of God's grace are the Word, Sacraments, and prayer. God grows us in these things. This is how we're going to grow in our competency to counsel. Presumably, this is how the Roman Christians were able to become full of goodness and knowledge and able to counsel.

And yet surely the church at Rome would have been made up of Christians who were in many different places spiritually. Some would have probably been very immature Christians, just beginning to grow in knowledge and goodness and wisdom. Others would have been much more mature in these areas. Yet Paul made this blanket statement here. I think this is important to note. You see, even the youngest real Christian has some entry level ability to counsel. Let me explain. I just mentioned that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate source of our qualification to counsel. The Spirit works knowledge and understanding of God's Word in our life. The Spirit works goodness and love in our lives. The real Christian is someone who has been born again; the Holy Spirit has regenerated their hearts and minds. They've repented of their sins and turned to follow after Christ. They are in a place now to begin to truly grow. They are in a place to begin to truly understand the Scriptures. They have the power of the Spirit to really do what a non-Christian secular counselor cannot.

Let me just give one example. If "self-control" is a fruit of the Spirit in our lives, how can the non-Christian counselor really effectively counsel for self-control? If "joy" is a fruit of the Spirit in our lives, how can the non-Christian counselor really effectively counsel for depression? Don't get me wrong, they might have some general common grace wisdom that yields some surface level self-control and some surface level joy. But real biblical self-control and real biblical joy is going to come for the regenerated Christian according to the Bible by the Holy Spirit at work through the means of grace. The secular therapist has begun to taste of this fruit of the Spirit. On the other hand, the Christian who has been truly born again and regenerated, has begun to taste of Holy Spirit in their life. They've begun to see this fruit growing in their lives. They've seen it working as a result of God's Word coming into their life. In some real sense, even the youngest real Christian has a beginning competency to biblically counsel.

Let me offer some clarifications here. This does not mean that every Christian is going to be as gifted as others in this area. Nor does this mean that we are equipped as we can be in this area. In fact, Christians can actually do a lot of damaging things when they attempt to counsel someone if they do it in an unbiblical way. That's why I'm going to teach a short series on this subject. Verse 15 of this passage in fact goes on for Paul to mention to the Romans that he's had to write on various subjects in this letter by way of reminder to them, despite their competency to counsel. Verse 15 here tells us that even though these Roman Christians were able to counsel, that there were areas they still needed to grow on in their own counsel. They themselves needed counsel as well.

The last part of verse 15 and into verse 16 also reminds us that there are some Christians especially gifted for this counseling ministry. Paul emphasizes his own apostleship here as the reason he's had to admonish them in the ways he has in this letter. We see this very clearly in other places in the New Testament as well. For example, 1 Thessalonians 5:12 uses this same word *noutheteo* in regards to a

specific thing that elders do. 1 Thessalonians 5:12, Paul says, "And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you." *Noutheteo* is the word for admonish there. In other words, there are elders and pastors in the church who have a special function of biblical counseling in the church. They have been given special authority to exercise this function in a formal and official capacity.

And so I'm not saying that we all will give biblical counsel in the formal and official capacity that elders and pastors do. This should, by the way, add an extra measure of humility to any counsel you give anyone. You don't come with the same authority that Christ has given the church elders in overseeing the flock. And yet as you come to people, you come humbly commending to them God's Word, which of course is the ultimate authority.

And so let me sum this point up. We are not all in positions of authority in the church. We are not all official biblical counselors from that perspective. We don't all have the same gifts to counsel as everyone. Yet, this is something each of us should aspire to grow in. Every true believer has already begun this process of equipping by the very fact that the Holy Spirit is planted inside you. We each should then aspire to become more and more equipped to biblically counsel.

Let me give a sort of simple example in this. When you get sick, do you race to the doctor at the first sign of a cold or flu? Probably not. If you cut yourself with a minor cut, do you rush off to the ER? Probably not. Most of us have basic knowledge of our health. Most of us can perform basic first aid. If you catch a cold, you probably follow some simple home remedies first before going into the doctor. If you get a small cut, you clean the wound and put a Band-Aid on it, and don't go to the doctor unless it shows signs of infection. We should all learn and know basic things about taking care of your physical health, and you only go to the doctor for the larger issues. Well, the same is true with biblical counseling. We all should be able to counsel ourselves and others from Scripture and only go to the pastors and elders for the more difficult or serious issues that we encounter, or when the Bible itself tells us it's time to bring a matter to the elders.

And so as I give us this challenge today to look to grow in your ability to biblically counsel, let me encourage you with the gospel. This is what we've already been talking about. The gospel makes a difference in this area. You're able to biblically counsel as a Christian, because Christ is our helper. He's at work in your life through the Holy Spirit. He brings change in your life, by his Holy Spirit. He will use you to bring change in other's life, also through the Holy Spirit at work through your biblical counsel.

1 John 2:1 describes Christ as our helper. This can also be translated as an advocate, or even as a counselor. The Holy Spirit is described the same way in John 14:16. Jesus, our helper, our advocate, our counselor, sends the Holy Spirit to be our helper, our advocate, and our counselor. This is all related to our salvation. Christ achieved our salvation on the cross. He won our forgiveness and eternal life through the victory of the cross. The Holy Spirit applies that victory to us. The Holy Spirit is our counselor at our initial point of faith. He confronts us with our sins through the Word of God. He points us to Christ, to begin a life of becoming like Christ. He then is at work throughout our life making us more and more conformed to the image of Christ.

The art of biblical counseling is something we all do, because it so central to the gospel. It's nothing short than connecting others with Christ, through the Scriptures, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's connecting other with Christ in the same way we've been connected with Christ. It's Christ using Christians to

help one another become more like Christ. He does this all through the Word. He does it especially through ordained elders and pastors, but even through every believer. This is why it's so important that we have a fellowship time after the service as well. It's a chance to equip and encourage and exhort each other in Christ. It hopefully leads to greater opportunities for you to biblical counsel as well as you really engage in one another's lives.

And so as Christians may we each be ready to give biblical counsel. May we each be looking to improve on our ability to give biblical counsel. May we look to indeed be full of goodness, and knowledge of the Word, and wisdom in the Scriptures. May we too heed biblical counsel as it comes our way. May we especially respect and honor those officially charged with this capacity in Christ's church.

I know this is a very big subject, thinking how to wisely counsel someone. It can be intimidating. When do you give someone counsel? How do you know when you are giving godly counsel and doing the right thing, or if you just meddling in something that is not your business? The bible tells us there are several temptations that come to us when we look to biblically counsel others; we need to be on guard against those. One of the biggest temptations is to give *unbiblical* counsel. There are certainly many challenges that you face when you counsel others. How do you address in counseling common situations like conflict, and the need for reconciliation and forgiveness? What does forgiveness and reconciliation even look like in the church? There are many questions. Our next several sermons will seek to address these questions. Certainly these are areas we ought to continue to look to grow in, even beyond these few sermons. Take comfort in knowing that it is God's Spirit that is ultimately at work through the Word in any biblical counseling situation.

Another way you can grow in this area is to take advantage of some of the resources we have in this area for this specific skill of biblical counseling. For example, the Biblical Counseling Center of Sonoma is having a class put on by Pastor Kevin Kirby in September on lay counseling. That would be an excellent resource. There's also an even more basic introductory course on this subject coming up out at a biblical counseling center in Walnut Creek in September on Wednesdays. Let me know if you'd like more information on either of those classes.

Let's pray now asking for God to equip us to be a blessing to others as we look to admonish and instruct one another via the principles of God's Word. Let's pray that we would start first even by admonishing and counseling ourselves with the Word of God in those areas we know that we need to grow in by God's grace.

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