

Session 07 – Pastoral Counseling

Review of Last Session

- Active listening skills
 - **Open questions:** Questions that cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no” and give the speaker room to set the agenda.
 - **Behavior description:** A description of the speaker's behavior that does not make any judgment on its meaning. This is a simple statement of what you see. Use an observation formula: “I notice that you... What can I learn from that?”
 - **Paraphrasing:** A concise response to the speaker that states the essence of what the speaker said in the listener's own words. It should be concise. It should include only the essential elements. Use a fact-check formula: “If I understand correctly... Is that right?”
 - **Reflecting feelings:** A reflecting back of the feelings the speaker is communicating. Listen for feeling words (such as “angry, hurt, annoyed, happy,” etc.) Observe body language, which is the language of emotion. Use a feeling-check formula: “I hear you saying that you feel... Is that right?”
 - **Reflecting meanings:** A reflecting back of feelings as they relate to the facts of the speaker's situation. Try to see the links between circumstances and emotions in order to mirror them back. Use a meaning-check formula: “I hear you saying that you feel... because... Is that right?”
 - **Summative reflection:** A summary of the main themes and feelings that emerged from the whole conversation, which allows the speaker to see what you have discovered together.

A Biblical Perspective on Pastoral Counseling

- Love is a Christian mandate, and preachers are not excluded (1 Corinthians 13:1). So, counseling may be an appropriate expression of your Christianity.
- God is the source of all healing, and healing is a path to the gospel (Luke 10:9). So, counseling may have a role in spreading the gospel.
- The category of church leadership that includes the pastor centers on equipping others for ministry, not on care-taking (Ephesians 4:11-12; Acts 6:1-2). So, counseling may become a distraction from your central role.
- Since the mandate to love includes preachers, and healing is often a path to the gospel, taking time to counsel may be appropriate but member care must not be allowed to overshadow our first calling. Although it might seem cold to turn away clients, it is really reserving space to spread God's love to unbelievers also. In summary, from a biblical perspective, pastoral counseling should be done sparingly but when necessary. Furthermore, it is most appropriate when it relates to coaching others to find and develop their ministry calling.

Real Life Scenarios

- Before discussing guidelines for pastoral counseling, let's begin to think it through by considering two actual scenarios.
- Example #1: Cindy
 - Someone from the church called to tell me that an absent church member had shot and killed her boyfriend. She wanted to meet with me for pastoral counseling. When we sat

down together, she expressed a sense of shock and guilt for what she had done but said she had done it in fear for her own life.

- How would you approach this case?
- Example #2: Martin
 - Martin approached me, saying that he needed counseling to work through issues from his past. Martin was socially inept and hygienically challenged. He said he wanted to know what answers the Bible might have for his life difficulties. I agreed to meet with him. But, during our first two meetings, it was clear that his mind was not able to focus, and his real purpose for meeting seemed to be finding a social outlet.
 - How would you approach this case?
- At least two cautions emerge from these scenarios:
 - First, be careful not to engage in counseling when the situation is beyond your level of skill.
 - Second, be careful not to let counseling become a waste of precious ministry time.

Knowing Your Limitations

- In order to avoid going beyond your level of skill, you need to know your limitations and how to recognize when the need goes beyond it.
- The most significant limitation is that, although a pastor is a minister of God's word and grace, they are not trained to deal with mental illness of any kind. The pastor can only effectively work with the emotions and thoughts of a person in relative mental health. God can do more, so don't neglect your prayers, but your official role does not allow you to help in these areas.
- Several websites list signs of mental illness. A pastor must never attempt to diagnose but should be able to recognize when the needs of the client are beyond their skills. The following websites may be helpful:
 - <http://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/mental-health-warning-signs>
 - http://www.medicinenet.com/mental_illness/article.htm
 - http://www.healthyplace.com/site/disorders_list.asp
- Probably the most significant question regarding pastoral counseling is whether counseling the person at hand will best advance the cause of God or distract from it.

Four Phases of Counseling (taken from *Practical Psychology for Pastors* by Miller and Jackson).

- In order to keep counseling from becoming a waste of ministry time, you need to understand how to direct its progress.
- Clarification—accurately understand the counseling relationship.
 - Confidentiality: Take note in your own mind that when you enter the counseling relationship, confidentiality is absolute (except in cases of permission, danger, or legal liability).
 - Limits: Put time and place limits on the counseling relationship so it does not spill out into others areas of interaction.
 - Listening: The most important part of the clarification phase is listening, both to help you understand and to communicate openness. There is no room for giving advice at this phase, because it will end the clarification phase prematurely.
- Formulation—accurately understand the clients situation.
 - Quite often, what appears to be the client's problem is not the real problem.

- Four diagnostic questions provide a framework for considering the possible problems and how they might be solved.
 - What is troubling this person?
 - Affect
 - Behavior
 - Thought
 - What is causing the problem?
 - Primary causes
 - Predisposing causes
 - Precipitating causes
 - Perpetuating causes
 - What is missing?
 - Work
 - Relationships
 - Aloneness
 - What is needed?
 - Change
 - Choice
 - Confusion reduction
- When we talk about these diagnostic questions, it is important to remember that you have no training that allows you to diagnose mental disorders—only basic life issues. Your task in looking for signs of mental disorders is to identify the likelihood of such a disorder so you know when you are in over your head and when to direct the client to the help they need.
- Intervention—actively move toward the needed goals.
 - Lead the client to set their own goals for change or choice and you serve the role of accountability.
 - Know whether you can or cannot be part of the intervention:
 - If it is primarily spiritual or emotional, you can provide the help.
 - If it is deeply psychological, you need to refer them to an appropriate expert.
- Termination—transition back to a normal pastoral relationship.
 - Termination should occur when the client's need is met or your own limitations have been reached.
 - End by summarizing progress and concluding or referring the counseling.