

Pa232 Counseling

Lesson Pa232-2 First Things First

In the first lesson you learned the first principle of biblical counseling. It is to keep information shared with you in strict confidence between you and the person coming to you. This second lesson will now consider four more important principles we, as God's servants, can learn from Jesus' example.

Have you ever been a part of a conversation in which troubling questions were asked? Did you feel helpless? Did you want to respond in a positive way? Listening to people and asking God to use you to give wise counsel is basic in biblical counseling. The Bible has stood for centuries as the primary source of godly counsel and advice. With the Scriptures and the Spirit of God leading, you have what you need to help hurting people. You must study the Word of God and care enough to listen to the needs around you. Then the Holy Spirit will equip you to help them.

This lesson will use the Bible story of the ruler who came to Jesus with a question. Why would a stranger seek out Jesus with a question? Possibly it was because he had noticed Jesus' life and his teaching. He became sure that Christ would listen when a problem came that needed an answer.

To put first things first, Jesus shows us he was approachable. He always had time to listen to a person in need. He demonstrates to us how to focus on another individual and listen to what they are asking. This is an important principle of counseling. It is called *active listening*. As Christians we could even refer to it as 'listening with discernment'—that is, listening with the Holy Spirit helping our understanding. Focusing on the concerns of another person is rewarding. This kind of ministry is close to the heart of God and he will help you.

Luke tells the story this way, "A certain ruler asked Jesus, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

"'Why do you call me good?' Jesus answered. 'No one is good—except God alone'" (Luke 18:18-19).

Here, in the opening of the conversation, you can observe another foundational principle of counseling: *humility*. Before even addressing the question, a counselor must help the one asking to have a proper understanding of who he is coming to. Jesus immediately corrected the ruler's perspective of him. Christ was reminding the man that only God is totally good and perfect. Only God gives eternal life. People may approach you and treat you in such a way that they seem to be thinking you are God. You too may have to remind them that you are only God's servant. You are a sinner saved by grace just like they are. Their only hope is in relying on God.

Righteousness comes from God and is by faith, not works. This is what the apostle Paul taught. But you do want to listen to people and you will try to help them as God directs. So, what was the man really asking? He was thinking in terms of the Law, of 'doing.' "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" False religions are based on works. Eternal life, however, cannot be earned

through doing good works which are external things. Eternal life is a gift to be received based on a person's faith, an internal thing.

Jesus began to answer his first question by saying, "If you want to enter life, keep the commandments" (Matt 19:17). Keeping the precepts of the Law was the first step. It was an expression of external conformity to God's rules in his life. But the young man still had the idea of seeking merit, rather than expressing faith. So, he asked for more specific instructions.

He inquired as to *which* of the commandments should be kept. The conversation continued. Jesus listed six commandments that concerned wrong actions and wrong attitudes toward others. The man replied, "All these I have kept since I was a boy. What do I still lack?" Though the young ruler was living a good life to all observers, he himself still felt a lack. He did not have assurance of eternal life. He was seeking answers.

Many times, the first questions of a conversation do not reveal the whole story. Further engaging the person in conversation will bring out other issues. Finally the real need, or most urgent need, may become obvious. This talking together helps to build relationship and trust. Thus, active listening can also be referred to as 'focused' listening. The counselor will do some talking to gather information and get to know the person. He or she should do more patient listening and focus on the person's words, feelings, and responses.

Jesus looked at the man and loved him. He recognized the man's earnestness. *Compassion* must be the attitude of a godly counselor. This attitude can be seen in a person's eyes, in their gestures, and in other loving behavior. The behavior must be appropriate to the culture and to the relationship between the counselor and the counselee. You are a representative of Christ to that person. Jesus is "making his appeal" through you (2Cor 5:20). This attitude will be discussed further in another lesson.

Jesus lovingly *suggested a solution*. "One thing you lack," Jesus said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). Jesus knew the ruler's real problem. He lacked inner obedience to the spirit of the Law, though he followed the external rules. His primary problem was the weight of his wealth. Having wealth in itself is not sin. If maintaining wealth becomes more important than following God, however, that becomes sin. Giving away wealth is not a 'good work' which will cause any one to deserve eternal life either. Jesus' prescription was specific to this young ruler, at this place, at this time. It was not meant for all people, everywhere, through all time. That principle will also be considered in other lessons of this course.

By selling his possessions, giving away his wealth, and following Jesus, the man would then get his priorities straight. He would be saying by his actions that pleasing God was more important than pleasing himself. Laying up treasure in heaven was more important than laying up treasure on earth. In this way, he would inherit eternal life—the answer to his original question.

Now what was the rest of the story? Did he do what Jesus asked him? Did he align his priorities with God's priorities? The Bible does not give the answers to these questions. The Gospel writers simply say that when the man heard Jesus' answer, his face fell. "He went away

sad, because he had great wealth.” They imply that it was very hard for the man to accept Christ’s answer to his question. Counselors can only speak and advise as the Holy Spirit directs them. It is the responsibility of the one receiving the counsel to act on that direction or not.

This lesson is **important** because it teaches from one Bible story some of the foundational concepts of counseling:

- Actively listen; as you focus on the person and discern their real need.
- Keep a humble view of yourself; realize only the Holy Spirit has the answers.
- Demonstrate an attitude of love and compassion.
- Respond by suggesting a solution as God leads you.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that by following the pattern of Jesus you can help people better understand how to know and do God’s will.

To **review** this lesson, answer the following questions:

1. What was the one question the ruler asked Jesus that began this encounter? [Pause]
A. If you said that he asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” you are correct.
2. What was the solution Jesus gave to him? [Pause]
A. If you said, “Jesus told him, ‘Sell everything you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow me,’” you are right.
3. Does Jesus telling the ruler to sell everything mean that every believer must sell his belongings to inherit eternal life? [Pause]
A. The correct answer is, “No, these instructions were specific to the needs of that ruler at that time. Jesus knew his wealth had become more important than following God.”

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to the story and retell it in your own words. Reviewing the stages of Jesus’ conversation with the rich young ruler, memorize the four counseling principles found in this story:

1. Actively listen.
2. Keep a humble view of yourself.
3. Demonstrate compassion.
4. Respond by suggesting a solution.