

The Ear of the Wise Seeks Knowledge:
Gathering Data in Biblical Counseling

Today we are continuing our short series on biblical counseling. As I mentioned last week, we're going to spend a few weeks thinking about this subject from a very big picture perspective. In other words, we're not going to cover the topic exhaustively. We're going to instead touch on some of the more important and misunderstood areas of this subject. Last week I mentioned some of the lay counseling classes coming up in September by the local biblical counseling training centers. I do encourage you to consider making use of some of them if you'd like to get a more thorough and systematic training in this area.

Well, today's focus on biblical counseling will be on data gathering. We're going to think how important it is to gather adequate data when you are giving someone biblical counsel. These proverbs tell us this in general, and they also alert us two common dangers in this area. You shouldn't give someone biblical counsel to their particular situation, if you don't know the all details of their situation. Let's dig right in and see how this passage teaches us about this.

Look with me first at verse 13. This shows us our need to gather data in general before giving out counsel. Verse 13, "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him." This puts it pretty bluntly. It is folly and shame if you start giving someone biblical counsel before you've listened carefully to the details. Folly and shame. Not good. Folly is another word for foolishness. In other words, it is unwise to give someone this sort of uninformed counsel. Do you want to be a wise biblical counselor? Then don't give the person any counsel until you've heard out all the details. Listen, before you come up with your counsel.

But this sort of impulsive counsel is not just foolish. It's not just unwise. But it says here that it's to your shame. Shame on you if you give counsel in this way. Not only is it unwise, but it's to your own disgrace. If you presume to give someone biblical admonition, it should be full of wisdom and knowledge. There is nothing wise about counsel that hasn't heard out a matter. In which case, you should not be presuming to give anyone counsel. If you still do anyways, then this proverb basically says it is shameful for you to give that kind of counsel.

So this is the first danger presented here. There's a danger in answering before you listen. But this passage also reminds us of the solution to this. It's a somewhat simple solution in one sense. It's "listen." Verse 15 flushes this out a bit more. Verse 15, "The heart of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge." You can apply verse 15 to basically everything in life. It's always good to seek out knowledge. But this, of course, has very specific application to biblical counseling as well.

In counseling someone, we want to give a wise answer. We're told here that you can't do that, if you haven't heard out a matter. What we should be doing then is what we read in verse 15. You need to seek out the details. You need a thorough *knowledge* of the situation. Verse 15 tells us that both our heart and ear need to have this goal.

So when you find yourself giving biblical counsel to someone, you need to start by finding out as much of the details about a matter as possible. You need to ask lots of questions. Yes or no questions probably aren't the best ones. Ask about facts. Ask about specifics. Ask some "why" or "how" questions to try to get to the heart of the concern in that individual. If multiple people are involved, ask each to confirm the details and facts. Watch for body language. Listen for the tone of voice. Repeat things back to people in your own words to make sure you've understood them

correctly. You're trying to get out all the facts and truths of a matter. Context is important and helpful, though sometimes you'll have to steer the conversation to keep it on track from irrelevant details. Sometimes attempted sidetracking in the conversation can even help you find what you really need to uncover. In other words, sometimes people try to change the subject when you've really hit on the heart of the matter. Sometimes getting to the heart of a matter exposes someone's sin, and that might be when they want to change the subject.

Of course, how formal you will go in all of this, will depend on the circumstances. If someone comes to you explicitly asking for counsel on something, then it's quite fitting to sit them down and have a conversation on the matter. Take as much time as is needed to adequately get the details. That situation becomes all the more appropriate for you to ask them tough questions if they asked you for counsel.

On the other hand, sometimes you might be in a conversation where you suddenly have a spiritual concern for someone based on something they've said. Well, you shouldn't just start spouting off your concerns to them if you haven't fully investigated the matter with them. Now, in the course of the conversation you might be able to informally learn the details of your observed concern. If so, maybe you have the details needed to give biblical counsel or admonition. Of course, sometimes our questions in this sort of situation may not be welcomed. We must make sure our questions are not coming off as accusatory or like some inquisition; again if we don't have the details to give any biblical counsel or admonition, then we shouldn't have any accusations implied in our questions. We shouldn't be fishing for evidence to use against someone. That would mean you've already made some judgment against them in your heart. If you do have a real concern about someone's life that they aren't asking for you help on, then probably the best thing to do is to just invest in that relationship. Really get to know them as a person, and if your concern is really valid, it will show itself on its own. You won't need to force it.

In other words, don't feel like you need to rush this data gathering. Don't make assumptions. Don't go looking for problems in people. If the person asks you for counsel, then ask sufficient questions to get all the details. Otherwise assume the best about someone until you discover otherwise. Respect people's boundaries and privacy and don't go pressuring them to share details of their life that they are not ready yet to share with you.

So that is the first danger and solution presented in our passage. We need to gather data before we start giving counsel on a matter. The second danger warned about is something more specific, but related to this. It's in verse 17. "The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him." This is a verse we would all do well to memorize. It warns us of the danger of coming to a conclusion before we hear every side to a story. Our first point today was that we shouldn't give counsel until we gather all the data. This verse tells us that gathering all the data, includes hearing all sides to a story. In other words, it is folly and shame to start giving counsel before you've heard the whole story from all the interested parties. It's wrong to speak to a matter if you've only gathered data from one person in the midst of an alleged offense.

The point of this verse is pretty clear. There is some alleged offense or sin in which two different parties have two different opinions on the matter. When you hear out the first person, you might be inclined to assume their view on the matter is right. This proverb tells us that we don't have enough data yet to make that conclusion. You need to hear out the other perspective on the matter as well. This is true whether the first person to speak is the one bringing the accusation or the one making a defense. In either case, whoever speaks first often makes quite a compelling case, until everyone's been given the proper due process. This due process should let each side speak, should let each side defend themselves, and should let each side cross examine each other.

What this means is that we need to follow the appropriate process in dealing with offenses. The Bible tells us the process to follow. The Bible tells us different processes for different kinds of offenses. The nature of the offense will dictate the process. You have personal offenses and non-personal offenses. A personal offense is when someone sins directly against another person. A non personal offense is when someone is sinning in general, just not directly against someone. An example of a personal offense is stealing your neighbor's newspaper. You sinned personally against your neighbor. An example of a non-personal offense is taking the Lord's name in vain; you've not sinned directly against another human in that situation. Both personal and non-personal offenses can be either public or private. The nature of the offense will dictate which process you need to follow biblically for giving everyone their fair hearing.

When a matter is of a private nature, the processes in Scripture are especially clear. Personal offenses are going to be handled by the process of Matthew 18. Non-personal offenses are going to be handled by the shorter process of Galatians 6:1. We read these passages earlier in the service. Both processes would end up before the church elders in a church court case if repentance and reconciliation isn't achieved through these processes. The elders would then make the final judgment in that situation between the disagreeing parties.

Now, when a matter is of a public nature, something generally publically known to many, it's still not wrong to follow Matthew 18 or Galatians 6:1. In fact, usually I'd argue that's still the wisest course of action. This is especially true if the matter becomes only publically known by a few individuals. In that situation, you can let the few individual know that Matthew 18 or Galatians 6:1 is underway, and then report back to them later on the resolution. These processes are to protect the good name of individuals while each party is given their due process of justice and the right to defend themselves. Sometimes, sins become so public, that more immediate action is needed, and there are other Scriptures to help guide us in those more extreme circumstances. Typically that will be something the elders will have to handle.

And so it's in these processes given in Matthew 18 and Galatians 6:1 that there are opportunities to gather data. In the Matthew 18 process, for example, you might end up being one of the witnesses. You shouldn't come to hear both sides with your mind already having been made up by the person who came to you asking you to be a witness. No, you come in as a witness and hear both sides. You first gather data. Matthew 18 assumes that in that process you might end up giving biblical counsel and admonition. But you would only do that once you've unbiasedly gathered data from both sides.

On the other hand, if you are executing the process of Galatians 6:1, it assumes you've already done your data gathering with the person. You don't come confronting someone on an alleged sin if you've not already gathered all the data from all the relevant sources. And yet even then, you should come with great humility, ready to hear them out if they give a defense. It's possible they might have some defense that you weren't actually aware of. That can be another opportunity to yet gather data. You might have to even apologize to them if you find out that you accused them too quickly.

So, these are the general due processes given in Scripture for giving each person the opportunity to share their side of a story. In two weeks, we're going to spend more time flushing these processes out in greater detail. We'll also talk through some of the more exceptional circumstances of dealing with publically known offenses; I didn't go into that much today. So again, verse 17 warns us about giving biblical counsel before we hear all sides to a story. The solution then in our biblical counsel is to gather all this data. We need to hear all sides of the story before presuming to give biblical counsel.

Now this means that the ideal is to have all interested parties before you in order for you to give any biblical counsel. So as someone giving biblical counsel, you

often have to stop someone who has come to you looking for biblical counsel. If someone comes to you complaining how someone else is sinning against them in some personal private offense, you need to stop them. The immediate danger is that your supposed time of biblical counsel turns into a slander or gossip fest. Even if the person's accusations about the person is true, the biblical process for dealing with it is Matthew 18. If you are giving them biblical counsel, then your biblical counsel needs to start there. Before your mind becomes biased with just their side of the story, you need to stop them and encourage them to go through Matthew 18. Step 1 is that they go to them directly. You could end up being one of the extra witnesses in step 2, but they have to go through step 1 first. Then step 2 would involve you going together, maybe even with another witness, to hear out both sides. Then you might have some biblical counsel and admonition to offer. You might even serve in as a mediator in that role then. That's in light of the wisdom of verse 17 here.

Of course, here might be a good time to mention a warning concerning counseling someone of the opposite gender. If you are a woman, I don't recommend that you generally go and be the biblical counselor of a man. There's a place of authority inherent in all of this, and that means that generally this wouldn't be the right role for you to take on. That means that if a wife comes to you about problems she has with her husband, you probably shouldn't go alone with her as the sole witness in a conflict. Because you'll likely end up in a position where they'll need biblical counsel from the witnesses. Instead, refer the case to a godly man or elder to go with her. In similar wisdom, I don't recommend men to generally counsel women alone. Counseling can be intimate. Brothers, don't put yourself into a place of temptation. Sometimes the best course of action is to refer the matter to a godly woman in the church. Otherwise, get another witness in the room to be present for the counsel.

So to sum up this whole point. You need to hear all sides of a story if you're going to counsel properly. Do that through the processes given in Scripture. It's unjust to the person who doesn't get to give their side of the story, to make a judgment on such a matter otherwise. It's also unwise for you to accept as truth just one side of the story. How much clarity comes in counseling when you hear all sides! Now sometimes you can't get the other person to come together with you. Say a Christian brother is asking for counsel for a conflict with an unbeliever. Let's say that person won't come together to seek joint counsel. Well, if you only are hearing one side, you have to tread very carefully. You don't want to slander the other person. You also haven't heard their side of the story. In that case, if you can give any counsel at all, its counsel that acknowledges you're only hearing one side of the story. You have to make clear to the person you're counseling that you are giving them counsel based on the assumption that what they said is the actual truth. But in that situation, at the end of the day, you can only counsel that person and their sins. It wouldn't be appropriate for you to focus on talking about what that other person should do who's not there. In that situation, your counsel really can only be focused on change with the person who is actually there with you. Keep bringing it back to what the counselee can do to live and respond in a godly way in their situation.

As we talk about all of this today, I'm reminded of how Christ responded to the false accusations against himself at his trials. You see, that's what verse 17 has been talking about. It acknowledges that sometimes one person's testimony about another can be false. You have to let the accused person plead his case for the sake of justice. Yet, when Jesus received false accusations against him at his trial, how did he plead? He didn't make much of a case of his innocence at all. He kept silent. Jesus knew the truth. He knew all the circumstances. But he chose to not plead his case. He gave up his right to defend himself. Now surely the corrupt Jewish leaders wouldn't have changed their minds even if he had. But the reason for Jesus' silence is clear. He was allowing himself to be falsely accused and condemned. He did it for our sake.

You see, that's the other thing I'm reminded about when I think about this passage. I'm reminded of all the accurate testimony that could be said about my life apart from Christ. Apart from Christ, there would be plenty of testimony that could be spoken of against me. We know the truth of our lives, how we have lived in sin and rebellion against God. How many could rise up and rightly accuse us before God! God knows our sin and rebellion. Jesus knows it. On our own, apart from Christ, what real defense could we speak on our behalf? Apart from Christ, our own hearts condemn us of our sinful rebellion against God, 1 John 3:20. Jesus during his earthly ministry talked of all the people who can rightly accuse sinners of their rebellion. Moses would accuse us, John 5:45. Apart from Christ, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Queen of Sheba, the people of Nineveh all could accuse us, according to the Bible. Satan, of course is known as the accuser. Apart from Christ, all of these, and others, and even ourselves, can accuse us of sinful rebellion against God; rebellion worthy of death. They'd make a very convincing case. Apart from Christ, we'd have no good defense. And yet you notice I keep saying, "Apart from Christ." For that is our hope and salvation. That's our sure defense. If we are in Christ, if we have believed and trusted in Christ, then we need not fear any judgment.

Romans 8:33, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." This is why Jesus kept silent at his trial. That's why he didn't offer a defense. He did it so that on the cross he'd pay for the sins of us who had no defense to offer. We were guilty. Christ was not. He died in our place. The Bible calls us to take hold of this salvation through faith and repentant. Repent and believe in the gospel. There is no accusation that can stand against us, now that we have come to Christ. Praise be to the Lord. What wonderful grace!

And so in closing, brothers and sisters, I hope all of this perspective will affect our biblical counseling. I hope it will instill in us a great sense of humility when we counsel. Knowing that we didn't receive the strict justice and condemnation that we deserved should humble us. The fact that so much accurate testimony about our sins could be brought before God, should give us great pause before we condemn others based only on questionable testimony. Questionable testimony if the person hasn't been given their God-given right to defend themselves.

Let us offer biblical counsel to ourselves first. Let us not be quick to admonish others, if we've not been closely admonishing ourselves with God's Word first. This should instill humility in us. That humility should affect how we gather data from others. It should affect whatever counsel we give others.

When counseling people we can be so quick to judge and condemn others in unjust ways. We know Jesus warns about judging others. We also know that plenty of Scriptures tell us that there are appropriate times when we have to come up with righteous judgments. What that means is that Jesus is talking about not judging people in unrighteous ways. There are many ways you can judge someone in an unrighteous way. One of those ways is by making a judgment without having all the data. Resist this temptation. Realize too that even when you have heard from both sides, your judgment should be tentative if there is an open dispute between the parties. In a conflict where dispute and disagreement is prevalent, you might ultimately be called into a church court to give your witness and even your judgment of a situation. But at the end of the day, such disputes that make it to a church court will be decided by the elders of the church according to their understanding of the Word of God. That's the elders' God ordained task. They have to make the final judgment from God's Word in cases of dispute between believers. Humility will be required then too in receiving their decision.

In our civil governments, we believe in the principle of being "innocent until proven guilty." That principle is a good one. It's a just one. We shouldn't give anything less to our brothers and sisters in Christ. 1 Corinthians 14 says that love believes. We should believe the best about our fellow Christians. We should give

them the benefit of the doubt. Biblical counselors need to excel in this humility. Wise counselors need to hear out a situation before they start giving counsel or especially before casting accusations. Hearing out the matter needs to be according to the process of Scripture, i.e. Matthew 18 and Galatians 6:1. But, at the end of the day, if brothers and sisters are found to be in unrepentant sin, let us urge them to repentance. If our counsel is not heeded, then may the church elders act officially to call sinners to repentance. But let us all humbly point the unrepentant toward God's grace. May our status as forgiven in Christ fuel us to radically hold out this same forgiveness to others as well. Amen.

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