

The Counseling Zone By Pastor Blake Shaw



Now that we are done with the key elements of the Biblical Counseling process, we are going to take a case study followed with a few questions for you to ponder and wrestle with.

Case Study #3: Marcus is a 33 year old married man who gives a clear profession of faith in Christ for salvation and is a father of two children. As a businessman, Marcus travels quite extensively throughout the country and sometimes even overseas. Marcus and Julie are having significant marriage problems so he meets with you, the counselor, to “seek help.” Julie has given him the ultimatum to get counseling or the marriage is over. In an early session, Marcus confesses to you that he has had various adulterous relationships with women while traveling. Marcus also confesses to an “addiction” to pornography. Marcus says that he has repented of this sin but doesn’t love Julie anymore and doesn’t see how he can ever stop the sin or be truly reconciled to Julie. Counselor, wrestle with the following questions:

1. There is much more data to be obtained, but from what you have here, what do you think of Marcus’s repentance? Why? Think biblically.
2. The data here says he meets with you to “seek help”. What kind of help do you think Marcus wants?
3. Repentance is not a dirty word. It is a glorious word and one that you must be familiar with and must understand. So what would repentance look like in Marcus’s life if he were truly repentant?
4. Marcus says that he and Julie want to make the marriage work for the sake of the kids. Why is that not a good or appropriate motivation for staying in the marriage?
5. As a part of your church, you know that if things don’t change, you’ll have to initiate a Matthew 18 process with Marcus. How do you determine when to start that process?

Q&A continued from inside page ~



Fourthly, as believers we need to be reminded that this world is not our home. We are simply passing through (Philippians 3:20). Author C.S. Lewis reminds us in Mere Christianity that we were made for another world.

Fifthly, help the abused person remember that with the abuse they become tempted in various ways. Some temptations might be to live in fear, to respond in anger, to run, etc. Such temptations are certainly understandable and they are common to man (1 Corinthians 10:13), but help the person make a commitment to please God in all things (2 Corinthians 5:9), to fear God and God alone, and to trust Christ for the grace to respond in a way that would exalt Him.

Sixthly, help the abused person evaluate their life to make sure that they are not doing anything to provoke angry responses. This is the basic, “Get the log out of your own eye,” principle that is presented by Jesus in Matthew 7. Some abuse happens as a response to something that the abused person has done. It doesn’t justify the abuse, it just helps us understand more of the context in which the abuse takes place and then subsequently how the abused person might work to avoid being influential in the abuse. I realize that not all abuse cases involve an abused person who is doing things that provoke abuse. I am just suggesting that the abused person would do well to make sure in there is nothing they are doing that leads to a verbal abusive response.

Seventhly, help the person to make sure that if he is to suffer, let it be for righteousness’ sake. Peter, shortly after writing to wives who are married to disobedient husbands, and exhorting husbands on how to live with their wives, says, “But even if

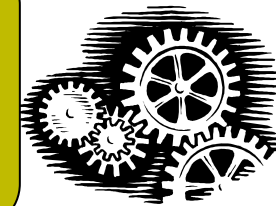
you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed” (1 Peter 3:14). Sometimes, but not always, people suffer abuse, and it is not for Christlikeness. It could be because the abused person preaches sermons, nags, shoves religious material in front of the abuser, or responds in ways that are anything but Christ-like.

Eighthly, if the person who is abusive is a professing believer and has had times where he/she has consistently demonstrated true saving faith and a love for Christ, then consider the steps of Matthew 18 where we read Jesus’ directions for church restoration. It is possible that the person who is being abused will need to be the one to initiate the confrontation. He should confront the abuser in private, as Jesus directs (v. 15). If the abuser will still not listen, then the abused can then ask for one or two to join him in the second step of seeking to restore the person (v. 16). Still yet, the abused may have to go the next step, assuming that the abuser has not stopped the abuse, and have the shepherds take the situation to the church and seek to ask the church family to get involved in seeking to restore the abuser (v. 17). Jesus says that if this process is carried out and the person (in this case the abuser) still will not change, then at that juncture, the church family would then view the abuser as an unbeliever. I realize that this answer doesn’t suffice for most people who struggle with how we (or the church at large) deal with abuse and perhaps the steps laid out here. This is in no way intended to be an exhaustive list of steps to take, and it may seem simplistic. However, these steps do provide some fodder for discussion on how we can help a person deal with being verbally abused.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: The Community of Grace Biblical Counseling Ministry and the editor of the monthly newsletter welcome letters from the readers. Letters may be edited if the editorial team deems it necessary to do so to fit the space allowed or due to unbiblical communication practices. We encourage the reader to write with edification in mind. Letters must be signed. Names can be withheld upon request. If you have a question about counseling that you would like to ask for future publications feel free to submit those questions to Pastor Blake Shaw.



THE COG COMMUNITY OF GRACE Biblical Counseling Ministry Edition #25 — January-April 2014



FOOD FOR THOUGHT BY PASTOR BLAKE SHAW



For several editions of the COG we have been dealing with one of the most critical issues that we can address and that is the issue of bitterness. (Hopefully you aren’t becoming bitter about our ongoing examination of this all-too-common struggle, and hopefully you aren’t bitter that we took a four month break from the COG while our proofreader was having cancer treatment.) One may ask, “Blake, why spend so much time on this one topic? Aren’t there other pressing issues in counseling that need to be addressed?” My answer is that there is truly many other pressing issues in counseling that we need to deal with, but I am more and more convinced that one of the most pressing issues of our time is the battle with bitterness. I say that because time and time again I interact with individuals who see a struggle with bitterness in their own life. I sit across the desk from individuals who are so saturated with bitterness that it oozes from their being. For such people, bitterness is part of their everyday facial expression and in their speech; indeed, bitterness has become their identity. It has destroyed who they were. May I say, with all the intensity that I can through the written word: “Bitterness will destroy you!”

My friends, bitterness is a serious and deadly issue that we must deal with and we must deal with it quickly and aggressively or it will destroy. Over the past several years I have taken note of what bitterness does in a person’s life. Here’s what it will do to you: It will choke you spiritually. It will turn your eyes inward as you become self-absorbed, which leads to more misery. It will rob you of joy. Worst of all, it robs God of the glory He deserves from your life. It puts God on the witness stand, so to speak, and demands that He answer questions from you. It will blind you and lead you on the path of self-righteousness where you become hyper-critical and hypocritical. It will destroy relationship after relationship, and, like yeast, will begin to infect those with whom you associate.

The incredible book of Hebrews says,

“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord; looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled...” (Hebrews 12:14-15).

Don’t pass over the words, “looking carefully...” Chew on those two words for a moment. Have you ever “looked carefully” at something? I’m guessing you have. My wife and I love to play these object find computer games. We spend much of our relaxation

time staring at the screen trying to find hidden objects. We look carefully at the picture. We examine it over and over searching for that obscure object. We don’t give it a casual glance but we look carefully at the picture. The writer of Hebrews draws our attention to issues such as the pursuit of peace, holiness, the grace of God, bitterness, causing trouble, and the defilement of many. God doesn’t waste words. The words “looking carefully” in the Greek language are related to what an overseer/elder does. Just like good spiritual leaders watch over and look carefully at the life of the people, we, too, are to watch out for that root of bitterness. In fact, many commentators on this passage point out that bitterness is the attitude of apostates (using Esau as an example in the verses that follow).

It is interesting that the writer notes here that the root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and many are then defiled by it. That is interesting because even a casual study of bitterness reveals how bitterness rarely ever stays at home in the heart of the embittered person. Most often bitterness flows out in one’s speech as the very words become a revelation of what dwells in the heart of the person who is bitter. And bitter words begin to infest others who associate with the embittered person. We must look carefully at our hearts to see if perhaps the seed of bitterness has been planted therein.

So what do we do with bitterness? How do we deal with it? As I mentioned in a previous edition, Being bitter towards someone is like drinking poison then waiting for the other person to die. It really is madness, huh? And what a horrible way to live! I hate it when I have to preface things I write but let me do so now, otherwise some readers of this article who have experienced a tough life and are bitter may tune me out at this juncture. So here is my preface: 1) I realize that life in this sin-cursed, fallen world is hard, and for some, the situations you have gone through in life can be extremely tough to walk through. In this article, as in others, I never want to convey an attitude of denying the tragic effects of the hardships of life or have a cavalier attitude about the sufferings of other people; 2) I write as a fellow-sinner, desperate for the grace of God in my own life, as I have seen at various junctures in my life elements of bitterness coursing through my veins. I have had to repent of such. I say that because I want you to understand that I write, not as a distant observer who stands as a judge, but as a sinner, just as capable of being bitter as the next person.

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Continued from cover page —

As we have seen in the previous articles on this issue, dealing with bitterness first begins with admitting that we have a problem. Second, we need to remember that God, as a loving, superintending Father, is at work to make us more like Christ (Romans 8:29) through the very struggles that tempt us to exit into bitterness. God is making us holy, which, based on Hebrews 12:13-14, without holiness no one will see God. Third, we saw that we must run to the foot of the cross of Christ, for it is there that we are sobered when we realize that the only innocent person to ever live actually suffered horrendously; and His suffering was in our place. If anyone had justification for being bitter it was Christ Himself. Understand, if you don't place yourself at the foot of the cross of Christ, you'll never make any headway in the battle against bitterness. As I wrote previously, "Run to the cross. Stand at the foot of the cross, and consider He who was bruised for our iniquities, who took our chastisement, whose body was broken for us and whose blood was shed for us. Stare long and hard at the cross of Christ. Be cross-eyed, if you will, for it is hard to dwell in the sewage of bitterness when you ponder the innocent crucified Savior."

Where do we go from here? Let me walk you through some questions that I believe are critical if we are to sort through the various factors that relate to our battle with bitterness. We'll look at a couple of questions here and then finish this study of bitterness in our next edition.

1) First, when reflecting back at your past when you were wronged by another/others, ask yourself, "Do I have perfect memory?" Hopefully your answer to that question is, "No." We have to begin the process of dealing with bitterness by admitting that we don't have an infallible memory. Many times people are bitter about something that happened years, or even decades prior, and yet they don't have perfect memory. The question doesn't deny that something happened. In fact, it doesn't deny that the person has an accurate memory of such an event. It's simply a starting point for us to think through and perhaps lead us to humbly approach this subject of some past offense against us and the bitterness that followed. Truth is that in many cases where one is sinned against, his memory of the event can be clouded and skewed to be more favorable to him. Our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9) so even in those cases where our memory is fairly accurate, there is always a looming possibility that our memory of the event might not be perfectly accurate. Start here.

2) A second question to ask yourself, and one that is much harder to answer, is: "Was I truly innocent in that situation?" Don't read into the question. It isn't designed to imply that every time a person has been sinned against they have done something to cause or to bring the sin upon themselves. We know that people are sinned against by others without any provocation. Likewise, we know that sinful people do horrendous things to others. We know that verbal, sexual, and physical abuse done to children is an example of sin that is mostly often unprovoked. But we also know that because of our own sinfulness, there are times where we were not innocent in the matter. This reminds me of a young woman who met with me once to talk about how she should deal with a horrific sin against her. This gal had been date-raped by her now, ex-boyfriend. These situations are brutally hard to deal with and can get real messy in a hurry. In our discussion about the situation I asked a ton of questions. Some were easy to answer; others were not so easy. There is awkwardness in asking questions because this woman was sinned against and the sin was a crime as well. As you can imagine, going to the police was not something she wanted to do because she knew that if it went to court she would have to relive the situation all over again. But as we talked about the situation, the dating relationship, and what she wanted to do, the young gal stated, "Blake, I made some mistakes. I don't feel like I can press charges for this because I wasn't totally innocent in this situation." She went on to tell me how she had compromised by dating the guy in the first place. They came from different religious backgrounds and had different standards of right and wrong. She shared how she had compromised by getting drunk with the guy on numerous occasions and had allowed the relationship to get much more physical than she should have. This illustrates for us why we have to ask the question, "Was I truly innocent in that situation?" If so, then we move on to the questions that we will consider next time. But if not, then we need to slow down and think through how we can deal with this issue in a biblical way. For the gal mentioned above, she realized that in her situation, she was not innocent, so she took responsibility for her part and learned from it. Now she uses her past to encourage teenagers to a life of wisdom and discernment.

Next month we will consider more questions that can help us address how we can deal with the bitterness that rages against our soul.



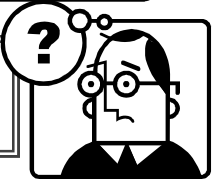
Q&A with Pastor Blake Shaw

Question: How would you respond to the accusation, "Grace Bible Church is really soft on dealing with abuse"?

Answer: In the last newsletter I began to address this question and I want to continue to address elements of this issue because, from my perspective, the issue of abuse is by far one of the most difficult issues we face in counseling. In the last article I put forward some points of clarification that I want to reiterate:

- 1) Abuse is a horrific issue, to be certain, and abuse is wrong, regardless of whether it is sexual, physical, or verbal.
- 2) Abuse characterizes the world we live in and abuse goes all the way back to the early pages of the book of Genesis.
- 3) We fool ourselves if we think abuse is not happening in the lives of people who in the church. Abuse happens and it happens more than any of us care to admit.
- 4) Because of the nature of abuse, it is oftentimes kept secret as the one being abused is silenced.
- 5) Abuse is actually a form of suffering.
- 6) Not having experienced abuse, as it is normally defined, I write as a fellow sufferer and want to gently and biblically address this huge issue. That doesn't mean I have not been abused but instead, I am not convinced that the things I have experienced in this life come close to some of the unbelievable abuse situations that take place in this world.
- 7) Not all abuse cases are so neatly packaged; there is a not one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with abuse.
- 8) This question is a challenge to answer because I run the risk of being self-serving as I respond to the accusation. I'd simply state at this point that I don't think it is a fair evaluation of the church, especially given the fact that the comment came from someone outside the church who really has very little understanding of all of the details of the many abuse cases we have dealt with and has heard only one side of some of the abuse cases.
- 9) Perhaps the hardest, most challenging issue to handle accurately in the counseling room is the issue involving abuse.

Abuse is abuse and it is just wrong, regardless of what label one puts on it.



I will try to unpack some of these points in this article. Wherever you have sin and sinners, there will be abuse. That reality does not excuse abuse or lessen the saddening nature of such. Abuse is abuse and it is just wrong, regardless of what label one puts on it. Sexual abuse and physical abuse are illegal actions and should be dealt with by law enforcement. But when we come to verbal abuse there is no law enforced recourse to take. In my counseling experience, verbal abuse is the most prominent feature of the three abuses that take place.

Perhaps a starting point is to define abuse. Webster defines abuse as, "a corrupt practice or custom; improper or excessive use or treatment; misuse (such as drug abuse); language that condemns or vilifies usually unjustly, intemperately (lacking self-control), and angrily; physical maltreatment. A verb form of this means to attack in words; and as an adjective, "abusive" has the idea of "using harsh insulting language; physically injurious..." Sometimes defining words can be helpful. At other times, not so much. I confess to you that this definition really doesn't help a lot. To me it is a perfect example of why dealing with verbal abuse is such a challenge. Examining this definition leaves us wondering how one determines an objective standard for true abuse. How does one determine what qualifies as verbal abuse? Is it left up to the recipient? It does seem so at times. Or, it might be left up to an arbitrary standard constructed by the community, the church, or the local government. I know in my mind when meeting with someone who describes a situation that sounds abusive that there is a point where I would say, "You are being verbally abused." But who anointed me as the authority on that issue. How do I set a standard for what is abuse and what isn't? Looking at the definition, I could possibly say that every time I referee a basketball game I am verbally abused because people continuously use language that condemns and is harsh insulting language. I use that point simply to help you understand that defining verbal abuse and determining if a person is living with a verbal abusive person is not so clear-cut.

So how should we deal with a situation where a person claims that they are being verbally abused? Firstly, gather data. As noted last month, before you dole out an answer, you better hear the story (Proverbs 18:13). And since it involves two people, Proverbs would caution you to hear both sides of the story (Proverbs 18:17).

Secondly, give hope. Help the person understand that God cares for them; that God knows what is happening, that He is intimately involved in the situation, and that He is conforming the abused to be like Christ (Romans 8:28-29).

Thirdly, consider that God may be paving the way for future ministry opportunities (Philippians 1:12-13) for the person experiencing abuse. It could be that God is using the situation and the abused person's response to the ongoing abuse to be an amazing testimony to an unbeliever, or is using the response of the abused to teach another person how to suffer well. Perhaps, as the abused responds with grace and love, his/her testimony to the abuser becomes the catalyst for the abuser to come to Christ. I Peter 3:1-6 directs a wife who is married to a man who is either an unbeliever or is a disobedient believer to live with such a man and to use her quiet and chaste behavior as a means to win him to Christ. Consider Jesus Himself as He was being abused, leading up to the crucifixion. Some translations speak of Christ as being "abused", not just verbally but physically. That is not disputed. But what is fascinating to consider is that as Christ hung dying on the cross, there was something profound going on in relation to His impact on two different individuals. We know of the thief who hung on a cross at Christ's side, was impacted by the Lord, and later entered into paradise. But we must note also that Jesus had a profound impact on a centurion who proclaimed, after Jesus breathed His last breath, "Certainly, this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39). The person who is being verbally abused can be reminded about the potential opportunities that God may just be preparing him/her for.

Continued on back page →

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES IN BIBLICAL COUNSELING

Second Annual Biblical Counseling Conference-July 24-26, Grace Bible Church. Registration forms are available throughout the church and at the church office.