

"Helping Others Grow with Wise Words at the Right Time" The Peer Counseling Side of HG Leadership

SGC Leadership Training Session 4 – April 2018

INTRODUCTION

One of the hardest parts of personal ministry is saying the right words at the right time. There are a number of ways this can misfire:

- *We assume people are just like us and say to them what someone should say to us. Counsel here has a lot of “just” sentences: “Just do this.... Just stop that.”*
- *We assume people are nothing like us and we have a hard time giving them patience and grace. Our ability to minister to people drops rapidly when they perceive you can’t relate.*
- *We give personal life tips but not biblical counsel.*
- *We say good things but lack a true relationship with the person.*
- *We speak words too quickly without taking time to understand a person’s situation.*
- *We say nothing because we’re afraid of saying the wrong thing.*

Tonight we want to explore this issue of helping people grow by saying the right words at the right time.

We’ll use a framework given in Paul Tripp’s *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*.¹ It’s a helpful as a way to summarize a lot of the Bible’s teaching. The essential idea: **Love, Know, Speak, Do.**

¹ *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (P&R, 2002)

It's not a formula or a process but a kind of paradigm. It's a way of thinking as you consider a person in your life you have responsibility for and see areas where they (might) need to change.

1. LOVE

Personal ministry starts with loving our neighbor, a command second only to loving God himself. Ideally, we want our personal ministry to others always to be the overflow of our love for them:

“Love highlights the importance of relationships in the process of change. Theologians call this a covenantal model of change. God comes and makes a covenant with us. He commits himself to be our God and he takes us as his people. In the context of this relationship, he accomplishes his work of making us like him.”²

Ephesians 4:15 brings this together well:

*Rather, **speaking the truth in love**, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph 4:15-16)*

When you take away love, our words become curses instead of blessings:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. (1 Cor 13:1)

When your love for someone is sincere and felt by them, they will overlook a lot of blundering attempts at saying the right things at the right time. When they don't trust your love, a perfectly spoken word at the perfect time with the perfect emotion won't be heard.

² Ibid., 110.

2. KNOW

A definition:

*“**Know** has to do with really getting acquainted with the people God sends our way. When you assume that you know someone, you won’t ask the critical questions you need to ask to get below the surface.... Knowing a person means knowing the heart.”³*

Knowing people truly is no easy task but leads to great blessings. Knowing people opens countless doors for ministry—some planned and many unplanned.

“Knowing the heart” has a **general and a specific** side. The **general** side happens as we live life together in the context of church and family. It means knowing:

- *A person’s history—what was their childhood like, their conversion, etc.*
- *A person’s current life—their work life, their marriage and parenting, their physical health, their financial health, hobbies, etc.*
- *A person’s spiritual life—fears, anxieties, struggles, emotional health, spiritual disciplines, etc.*

The less we know of these things, the more tentative we want to be when we speak into someone’s life.

- *E.g., someone who has financial anxieties: Maybe they worship the “god of mammon” or maybe they grew up with nothing and aren’t accustomed to financial stability.*

The **specific** side of “knowing the heart” has to do with addressing a particular issue or situation in someone’s life.

Relates to the biblical idea of “hear” before you “speak”:

³ Ibid., 111.

*Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be **quick to hear, slow to speak**, slow to anger;²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. (James 1:19-20)*

If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame. (Prov 18:13)

This takes work:

“We must not let ourselves become comfortable with the casual, where ministry is limited to offering general principles that would fit anyone’s story. The genius of personal ministry is that it is personal.... You cannot minister well to someone you do not know.”⁴

But it’s also a powerful benefit of our home group ministry. Also a powerful benefit of being in the same church.

When we discipline ourselves to “hear” before we “speak,” we save ourselves much trouble:

When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. (Prov 10:19)

3. SPEAK

“Speaking” is part of how we serve one another:

*“**Speaking** the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way.” (Eph 4:15)*

*“**Exhort** one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that one of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” (Heb 3:13)*

*“**Encourage** one another and build one another up” (1 Thess 5:11)*

Speaking is not all that these verses require, but it is a key part of it.

⁴ Ibid., 165.

Here we turn to the actual work of ministry to others. We've built the foundation through relationship. We've taken the time through observation and asking good questions. Now it's time to...open our mouths!

*“**Speak** involves bringing God’s truth to bear on this person in this situation. To do this you need to ask, ‘What does God want this person to see that she doesn’t see? How can I help her see it?’.... Speaking the truth in love does not mean making grand pronouncements. It means helping your friend to see her life clearly.”⁵*

Before we go further, we need to pause and consider what it means that we are **“counselors.”** When we are in the position of speaking truth to someone, we are in the role of a “counselor.” But what kind? In our culture, this can mean a lot of different things. Here are three basic kinds:

- (1) There are professional counselors who are technically trained, sometimes licensed, and typically paid. We are not that kind of counselor. Sometimes they can prescribe medicine, sometimes not.
- (2) There are non-professional biblical counselors who are sometimes extensively trained but are not licensed by the state as counselors. Their training is likely weekend seminars, some seminary training, perhaps receiving a certificate from an organization (CCEF, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, etc.) but not a license from the state.
- (3) There are those that the Bible calls “counselors.” This is where we fit in. At times they have official roles but at times they don’t. Proverbs speaks of such counselors:

Where is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety (Prov 11:14);

The thoughts of the righteous are just; the counsels of the wicked are deceitful (12:5);

*Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed (15:22);
Plans are established by counsel; by wise guidance wage war (20:18).*

⁵ Ibid., 111.

Through the Bible “counselors” speak to different people in the Bible (2 Sam 15:12, 31, 34; 16:23; Ezra 7:14–28; etc.). The basic idea is that “counselors” are those speak their wisdom and perspective into someone else’s situation. They can be good counselors or bad ones, wicked ones or righteous ones. They can take us closer to God’s will or further from it. Again, this is the kind of counselor we mean.

For us, our goal is *to be the kind of counselor who speaks biblical wisdom into someone life with the result that they grow in Christ.*

When we speak “God’s truth” as Tripp says, there are four broad categories you might consider:

- (1) God’s character – sometimes what is needed is for you to point others to Scriptures that speak of God’s holiness or love or faithfulness or omnipresence or sovereignty or goodness.
- (2) God’s commands – There are times when a clear statement about specific commands is in order. People moving toward a major sin might need reminders about the commands and God’s warnings attached to them. People confused and feeling “false guilt” might need a look at the commands so they can resist the false accusations of the devil. An over-sensitive or under-sensitive conscience needs to know what God’s commands are and see how they differ from his own sense of right and wrong.
- (3) God’s promises – It is often helpful to communicate some of God’s promises. He is with us (Matt 28:20; Ps 139:1–5), for us (Rom 8:31–32), will never forsake us (Heb 13:5), loves us (Rom 5:8; Jer 31:3), always receives us when we turn to him in repentance (Luke 15:11–32), etc. Sometimes what is needed is a clear expression of God’s forgiveness in Christ (1 John 1:9).
- (4) God’s gospel – In terms of words to say, the gospel is a good set of truths to have in your mind as you counsel. A summary of the good news is this: (1) God the holy creator, (2) made people and called them to obey, (3) but those people sinned and disobeyed his commandments and are guilty of

judgment and hell, (4) but Christ was sent to redeem them, and (5) responding in faith and repentance brings Christ's redemption to us, unites us to him, and destines us for eternal life with God forever. People struggling are losing their way in one of these areas. Are they off on their idea of God? Or his commands? Or their need to obey? Or the forgiveness available in Christ? As you listen to someone you can have the gospel message in your mind and be asking yourself where they are missing elements of it.

If the above gives us something of WHAT to speak, passages like 1 Thessalonians 5:14 remind us HOW to speak, that is, the different ways that we might speak to someone:

***Admonish** the idle, **encourage** the fainthearted, **help** the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thess 5:14).*

David Powlison has some rich reflections on this verse:

How do you admonish? When a specific form of unruliness is on the table, the counseling process will tend towards the clear cut, direct, and even dramatic. When Paul said, "Admonish the unruly," he meant it. When someone gets out of line (and God draws the lines that matter), you should speak up candidly and constructively. When you need to help someone straighten out, talk straight. Spell out right and wrong. Hold out God's justice, mercy, and power. You aim for a breakthrough, a moment of decision, of turning (though the working out of that decisive turning will always take a lifetime.) The sin is obvious (though of course other sins might also be hidden). The counseling approach called for is direct and lovingly confrontational. The analogy is with child discipline. Raise a defined problem directly and deal with it constructively."⁶

"Who are the fainthearted (literally, 'small-souled')? These are people who think, feel, and act as if they were all alone in a dangerous world. They approach life as if they were orphans, and are prone to fears, discouragement, anxiety, attempting to prove themselves, attempting to

⁶ David Powlison, "Family Counseling: The Paradigm for Counselor-Counselee Relationships in 1 Thessalonians 5," JBC (Winter, 2007), 9.

control the uncontrollable.... How do you encourage? This is a very different sort of person from the unruly. It calls for a strikingly different counseling approach. When Paul says, 'encourage the fainthearted,' he means just that. Come alongside tenderly. The word translated 'encourage' emphasizes offering personal consolation and solace in the midst of difficulties. Bring true hope. God is true to His promises. Communicate how God is faithful by what you say and do, by how you say it and do it, by who you are, by how you care. Give strugglers every reason to go forward into life: 'God will not forsake you. He is with you.'"⁷

"Who are the weak? Envision someone who needs ongoing help. They have marked limitations, like an infant or disabled child, someone whose handicaps mean that the possibility or likelihood of significant change is low. They may always need help. They may never have the ability to walk it out on their own."⁸

"Finally, 'be patient with them all.' Like each of the three previous sentences, this simply means what it says. Nothing fancy. Hang in there for the long haul. Persistently love all kinds of people. Never fail to be constructive and merciful, no matter what another person is like. Take the initiative to never give up on anyone. Love is patient."⁹

A few common situations and a few thoughts on them:

- When someone confesses a major sin
 - Point them to the gospel – 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”
 - Point them to a step(s) of repentance – Book to read, Scripture to memorize, another action step
 - Follow-up – Make a note to yourself to ask them about it in the weeks/months ahead.
 - Maybe they need to talk to an elder
- Protracted marital conflicts

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ Ibid., 13.

- “No matter how thin you slice the bologna, there’s always two sides” (Phil Sasser).
- Assume there’s a lot more history to this than you know. Assume that the words and actions you know about are only 5% of what’s really going on in the marriage.
- Get the elders involved.
- Gary and Betsy Ricucci’s *Love that Lasts* has some excellent chapters on conflict.
- Jonathan Edwards’ *Charity and Its Fruits*
- Depression
 - There are a thousand kinds of depression.
 - Depression hits all of us at some point. Variations on depth and how long it lasts. “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?” (Ps 42:5, 11).
 - Be very slow to assume you understand the precise struggle.
 - Rule out the obvious – physical ailments? Should they get a physical? Thyroid issues? Fatigue?
 - At times this involves a team approach: (1) You as a concerned friend; (2) professional counselor (with medications involved); (3) an elder
 - With serious and complex issues, remember where the help lies: Jesus, not with you. Prayer communicates that and points them to their real help.
 - Ed Welch’s *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness*
- Anxiety
 - “Do not fear” is a common refrain in the Bible (Isa 7:4; 8:12; Matt 10:28; Mark 5:36; 1 Peter 3:6).
 - Fear, like depression, has a thousand variations.
 - Temporary and obvious? Like nervousness before a performance review.
 - Complex and unpredictable? PTSD, chronic anxieties without a clear source.
 - At times it is a sinful kind of over-reacting because we love something too much—I love my reputation so much that I am paralyzed with anxiety when I am criticized at work.
- Unemployment

- Unemployment and chronic financial distress is an enormous burden to carry.
- The feelings of depression are extremely common— “It’s hopeless,” “I’m a failure,” “I’ll never get a job,” “I’m nothing but a burden to people.”
- If it’s a man trying to provide for his family, the temptations are even more pronounced— “I have no right to even be called a man,” “I thought God was called the ‘Provider,’” “Everyone else has it easier than me. Why does this always happen to me?”
- Other issues demand special care and real consideration of our words: the decline of aging, wayward children, normal issues of child rearing when children are very small, ebbs and flows of a young man at the very beginning of his career.

Be quick to ask for help if you have a situation you don’t quite understand.

One indicator that something deeper and perhaps biological/physical is involved is how involuntary the issue is. Anxiety for obvious reasons is one thing; getting routinely blindsided by panic attacks without any obvious trigger is another. The less voluntary it is, the more the person might consider professional help.

A couple ways to mess up with such difficult issues:

- Presume and give flippant answers that indicate you haven’t really struggled in this way: “God is sovereign; it’s going to be okay.” This is true, but said at the right time it feels condescending and like you don’t have time to enter into the hurt of someone else.
- Assume it’s far too complicated to give them simple truth from the Bible. At times, the best thing to do is to say the obvious thing they’ve heard before.

Prayer is always appropriate. Sometimes it’s best not to speak to the person about God, but to speak to God about the person.

4. DO

*Finally, you must help your friend **Do** something with what she learns—to apply the insights God has given to her daily and relationships. Insight alone is not change; it’s only the beginning. Insights about who we are,*

*who God is, and what he has given us in Christ must be applied to the practical, specific realities of life.*¹⁰

*But be **doers** of the word, and not **hearers** only, deceiving yourselves.²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a **doer**, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a **doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.** (Jas 1:22–25)*

Ultimately the goal of speaking the right words at the right time is to help them grow as “doers” of the word. Insight is not the same as change. Applied truth is the goal, not simply understanding the truth.

“Doing” involves:

- Growing in the practice of the spiritual disciplines (Bible reading, prayer, reading Christian books)
- Accountability, especially if the issue is a long-standing area of sin
- Obedience, especially if it’s an area where real and immediate change is necessary.
- Basic steps of responsibility: Sometimes the unemployed man needs your encouragement to do the practical steps required to find another job. He might be depressed, but he still needs to look for work.
- Loving God, loving one another, and loving our neighbor— “doing” the Christian life is about growing in our love for and service of others. Maybe the practical work involved is less directly about the issue and more about increasing their sacrificial service in the church and for those in their lives.

Change is gradual and perfection will be ours only when we see Jesus face to face:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

¹⁰ *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 112.

Till that day, may God use our words and love for others to help them become more and more like Christ.

Amen.