

Lay Counseling

Preparing Leaders to Help Others

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Course Introduction

A young but experienced pastor/missionary reflects on his thoughts about counseling:

When I first went to seminary, I believed that all that was needed to begin a church or to see one grow was good preaching, a decent plan, consistent evangelism, faithful prayer, and a few other core ingredients. I thought counseling was just for the weak. Many years later, after being involved in church planting and pastoring in various countries, I still believe that counseling is just for the weak. However, what has changed is that now I realize that all of us are weak, and we all need good counseling at various points in our lives. Counseling can be the difference between continuing to grow in our relationship with Christ or getting stuck. Good counseling at the right time can help immensely to continue the process of sanctification.

We hope this course, *Lay Counseling*, will assist you and others to become more like Christ.

Offering counsel is one way of helping people mature. Counseling is a conversation in which one person seeks to help another. The medium of this conversation is listening. The helper listens. After that, the one seeking help listens. This process continues until the problem is fully understood by both the helper and the one being helped. Oftentimes the one needing help is “cured” simply by a caring person listening and helping the person think through the issue. As this dialogue continues, the very act of compassion through listening has a great healing effect. In addition, many times and with God’s help, the counselor will have new and valuable insights to offer.

It is most accurate to say that this is a course in lay counseling. Another expression for “lay counseling” is “nonprofessional counseling.” That is an important distinction. You might be a pastor, but it is just as likely that you are a university student or a small business owner or a mom taking care of kids at home. In other words, most of you want to learn how to do lay counseling, meaning counseling done by laypeople who are skilled but who are not professional counselors.

What else is true about you? Are you married? With kids? Have extended family living nearby? Have a full-time job—maybe both you and your mate? Serve actively in the church? Have many other responsibilities as well?

Whatever the case, you are probably busy. You want to learn some needed new skills, but you cannot stop what else you are doing just to study. Thus, this course strives to be practical, effective, and brief.

Course Description

There are two people in the counseling process, maybe more. It does not matter where this process takes place—a pastor in an office meeting with a church member, a woman spending time with a friend at her kitchen table, a man sitting with a friend on a park bench. Counseling begins with two people seeking new understanding that will lead to change for the better.

Lessons 1-3 discuss the idea of who should be helping whom. Lesson 1 will talk about what some realistic limits are for lay people doing counseling. Clearly, you cannot help everyone. Jesus did not help everyone. Then Lesson 2 will discuss the people seeking your help. God's Word tells many things about them, regardless of who they are or what brought them to you. After that, Lesson 3 will probe who you are and how God has designed you. Self-understanding is one of the purposes of this course. How you help or counsel others will be shaped in large measure by the way you are designed.

Lessons 4-6 are designed to develop good listening skills and for you to help others by listening with empathy. Listening is a skill, like carpentry or cooking, and it takes practice. This course will offer opportunities for you to practice your new listening skills and experience how helpful they are.

Lessons 7-8 briefly explain and practice two approaches to counseling others. The first technique opens the eyes of the person seeking help to see what is already working well in a problem situation. Then you can assist the person in need to do more of that which helps. The second technique assists people to understand their emotions better and helps them change ways of thinking that are harmful. Lesson 9 expands the counseling process. Is lay counseling more effective if done as a couple? Is effective counseling possible without knowing the family from which the ones seeking your help come? Lesson 9 will suggest some answers to these questions.

Lessons 10-11 will address the common emotions of fear, anger, and guilt. Many problems are rooted in these feelings, and their origins and the problems they can cause will be discussed. You will see that each of these three wears many masks. In regard to guilt, the need to forgive and accept forgiveness will be discussed. A counseling model will be presented to help people work through forgiving those who have harmed them.

Finally, Lesson 12 will suggest ideas as to how a counseling ministry can be integrally woven into the ministry of the entire church. Counseling and its close relationship with discipleship is mentioned throughout the entire course but is focused

on in Lesson 12. This is the place to think together with your church leaders about how counseling can assist your church to grow and be healthier.

Contributions to Developing Character

Counseling, by its very nature, is about helping people change or, in other words, helping people grow and mature. The one needing counseling wants to change and grow but is stuck. The counselor is equipped with the tools to help people move forward and develop a more Christlike character. All of us get stuck in the process of maturing at different points and at different times. Everyone could use the benefit of a good listener and counselor at various stages in their lives. Unfortunately, many people never get help, and their growth in character is stopped.

As you study this course, many points of Personal Reflection will ask you to think through issues in your life that maybe you have been avoiding. Many of the Assignments will not only help you help others, but they should also help you grow and mature yourself. Some of the personal issues that will arise as you study this course can be worked through by personal meditation and prayer. However, some of the issues perhaps could be dealt with better if you yourself sought counseling. If you are taking this course with someone else or in a group, begin there. If you need more help, please seek it out. The most effective counselors have received the counsel of others and benefitted from it. It is our desire that you not only acquire new skills during the study of this course but that you become more like Jesus.

Contributions to Acquiring Ministry Skills

As with any ministry skill, counseling is connected to other skills. Improving and using the various skills help make you a more effective minister of the gospel. It, along with godly character, helps your light to shine more brightly in areas where a strong witness is needed.

Discipling. Counseling itself is a limited version of discipleship. As mentioned earlier, counseling is about change and growth, the very facets related to discipleship. Throughout the course, reference is made to how counseling and discipleship are interconnected. The goal of both is the sanctification of the believer. This course will help you be a better discipler. You will be equipped to help disciples grow and mature in more varied circumstances than you were prepared to do before.

Evangelizing. In this postmodern age, many experts believe that a good listener will be the best evangelist. All people have a need to be listened to and understood. People are won over by relationships that are full of compassion and empathy. *Lay Counseling* teaches you to be a good listener and trains you in other skills that can help the people to whom you are listening. As you listen and quietly help, you demonstrate the great love of God to the nonbeliever who likely would not have listened to you preach.

Pastoring. This ministry skill of shepherding others spiritually, whether in the position of pastor or of those who give caring attention to others, involves the ability to enter into their people's lives, sharing both their joys and their burdens. *Lay Counseling* will give you the skills to be better equipped to do this. The course will help equip you to listen actively and more fully understand the people seeking and needing your help. Pastors will gain skills in resolving conflict in members' families and in the church itself. In addition, they will learn new techniques to help people get unstuck and move forward in their walk with Christ. Not only will this help those who care for people, but it will also assist in helping develop healthy leaders for the future.

Teaching. Some of the best teaching is done on a personal level regarding personal issues. This course will enable teachers to understand people more fully and address areas of real need. Hurting people are often poor learners; therefore, this course will also assist counselors to open the eyes and ears of people so they can see and hear God's truth more accurately and fully.

Contributions to Building Relationships

This course is all about understanding relationships. During the course you will begin to understand yourself better. As you understand yourself better and begin to work through issues, you will be freer to develop healthy relationships with others. In addition, as you go through this course, you will learn to understand others more fully. This understanding will make you more empathetic regarding others' points of view. After the course is completed, there should be more grace and compassion extended when views of others differ from your own.

Lay Counseling will also equip you to help others work through issues that are causing relational problems in their lives. Those that you help will be enabled to develop fuller relationships with family members, colleagues at work, and others. People set free from their problems can more openly relate to others.

People are often inhibited in their relationship with the Lord because of anger, fear, guilt, conflicts, misunderstanding, bad habits, and the like. As you go through this course, you will learn techniques that can help both yourself and others overcome long-standing barriers. Once this occurs, you will be able to develop a deeper relationship with the Lord. Overall, the course offers many practical helps in developing better relationships with others and with the Lord, enabling you to apply the great commandments of loving God and loving others (Mt 22:36-40).

Contributions to Servant Leadership

Lay Counseling offers practical skills in servant leadership. The main skill gained in this course will be the ability to listen empathetically. Servant leaders must know how to listen to those under their authority and convey the message that they care. This course will help you develop skills that will enable you to understand more fully

what people are thinking and talking about. Only when issues are fully understood can appropriate solutions be developed.

Course Tasks

After completion of this course, you are encouraged to accomplish these Course Tasks both to test and to demonstrate that you have grasped the main objectives of the course:

1. Construct a chart listing important biblical passages and explanations of how they relate to various areas of counseling including: the fallen state of people, individual temperaments, listening skills, brief therapy, rational-emotive therapy, systems theory, fear, anger, guilt, and forgiveness.
2. Establish trust and rapport in a new counseling situation through the skills of empathetic listening.
3. Conduct a short precounseling session and two one-hour counseling sessions demonstrating an ability to establish a trusting relationship, set attainable goals, and correct distorted thinking patterns.

Course Objectives

When you have completed this course, you will be able to:

1. Counsel people through the lens of Scripture and the support of the Holy Spirit.
2. Identify the people necessary for the counseling process.
3. Establish a trusting, supportive relationship with people through empathetic listening.
4. Help others set goals to solve their problems.
5. Assist others to change unhealthy thought processes.
6. Apply biblical counsel and forgiveness to fear, anger, and guilt.
7. Design and develop a counseling ministry in a local church.

Course Outline

Lesson 1 Knowing When to Help

Lesson 2 Knowing Those You Counsel

Lesson 3 Knowing How God Has Designed You

Lesson 4 Learning the Listening Process

Lesson 5 Seeing the Big Picture

Lesson 6 Reaching Accurate Empathy

Lesson 7 Using Brief Therapy

Lesson 8 Applying Rational-Emotive Therapy

Lesson 9 Expanding the Counseling Process

Lesson 10 Understanding Common Problems of Fear and Anger

Lesson 11 Dealing with Guilt and Forgiveness

Lesson 12 Beginning a Counseling Ministry in Your Church

Student Instructions

In order to benefit the most from your study of this material, plan to work through the lessons in the order they are presented. In other words, you are encouraged to work through the course systematically rather than choosing a topic in the middle of the course as a place to begin.

Before you begin Lesson 1, we suggest you acquire a notebook. This will become your *Life and Ministry Notebook* (LMN) for recording a variety of insights for your own life and for ministering to others. You will use this notebook to write your responses to Assignments and other questions in the lessons. It is also a place where you can record your thoughts from the Personal Reflections, as well as any questions or problems you encounter in the course.

You should allow yourself two to three hours of study time to complete each lesson. This will include reading the workbook and completing the Assignments and Personal Reflections.

Course Design

The course objectives listed above summarize the most important things you will learn as you do the lessons. Study these objectives carefully and refer to them periodically as you work your way through the course.

Since most individuals taking this course are extremely busy people, each lesson is designed with clearly defined steps for easy reference. Also, if you study the Course Objectives and Lesson Objectives, you will know from the start on which topics to spend the most time.

Lesson Design

Several standard components are built into each lesson to facilitate your study and develop your skills and character. They are explained below so that you may recognize and use them to full advantage:

1. **Lesson Objectives** are provided to help you identify the most crucial parts of each lesson. They guide you in the effective use of your study time and will be used by your group leader for class discussion.

2. **Lesson Outlines** provide an overview of the sections of each lesson. In this way you can anticipate the flow and sequence of the various topics to be covered before you begin your study.
3. **Repetition and review** are woven into the course to help you learn new concepts.
4. **Assignments** offer you the opportunity to interact with the material being covered. Whenever you see this icon, stop and record in your LMN what is requested.
5. **Personal Reflections** stimulate you to reflect on the material covered and to evaluate your life and ministry. These are an important part of your growth. Paul says we are “transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rom 12:2). Whenever you see this icon, please respond to the Personal Reflections. Recording your thoughts in a notebook can be a valuable way of seeing how God is at work in changing the way you think.
6. **Adorations** arise from the lesson content related to the Person and work of God. They encourage you to respond to what God is saying to you as you study, to thank Him and to praise Him. Whenever you see this icon, pause from your study to respond to Him.
7. **Appendices** offer resources and useful reference materials that may be of benefit to you both in the course and in your life. These are placed at the end of the workbook.

Materials Needed

To work through this course, you will need a **Bible**, a copy of this **workbook**, and your **LMN** for all written work. Unless otherwise noted, all the Scripture references and Scripture quotations in this workbook are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Icons



Assignment: a question or study that focuses on course content. Written responses are required and are to be recorded in your *Life and Ministry Notebook*.



Personal Reflection: an instruction to reflect on scriptural truths or character traits or both as they relate to one’s walk with God. The focus is on personal application. A written response may be requested.



Adoration: an instruction to worship the Lord with reference to course content. The focus is on God. No written response is required.

Knowing When to Help

Two young men who did not know each other asked a counselor for help. Both of them were Christians, both of them were married, and both had a similar problem. The first man was a teacher in a school; the second was a worker in a hospital. Both of them discovered that a female coworker had a romantic interest in them. At first, both men strongly resisted any expressions of interest by these women, even though it was very flattering. However, with time both of the men felt increasing attraction to the compliments and the romantic overtures. At that point, they asked for counsel.

The counselor met with them separately and each explained the depth of his confusion—that he was filled with excitement, fear, and guilt. “Is it possible for you to remain at your job and still maintain your Christian testimony and the purity of your marriage?” asked the counselor. The first man evidenced godly sorrow, saying that his testimony and marriage had already been negatively affected. He said, “No, it is not possible.” He resigned from his job, humbly explained the situation to his wife, and today is happily married. The second man expressed fear that his marriage and spiritual life were at risk, but he felt that changing jobs “might cause others to ask embarrassing questions.” He was not ready to receive help. He later ended up committing adultery with his coworker.

Lay counseling can be effective only if you can clarify three things. First, is this person ready to be helped? Second, is this person’s problem one that can be helped by lay counseling? Third, am I the best person to help?

Lesson Outline

Is This Person Ready to Be Helped?

Can Lay Counseling Help?

Am I the Best Person to Help?

Is This a Responsibility from God?

Is This Something I Have Time to Do?

Is This a Risk to Me Morally or Spiritually?

Whom Then Should I Counsel?

Conclusion

Lesson Objectives

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Distinguish the person needing help from the one who is ready to receive help.
2. Decide if the person's problem can be helped by nonprofessional counseling.
3. Evaluate your own suitability for helping a particular person with a particular problem.

Is This Person Ready to Be Helped?

In the scenario at the beginning of the lesson, one of the men was ready to receive help, but the other was not. Your best hope as a counselor is to be as helpful as you can, in a short amount time, to a limited number of people—especially those who are ready to receive your help. Lay counseling can be very helpful but only if you have limited goals.



After completing this course, you will only be able to help a limited number of people with a limited number of problems. How do you feel about that? Write your answer in a few sentences in your LMN. Try to be specific.



1. Take an objective look at your answer above.
2. What does your answer seem to say about you as a person?
3. Write down two observations based on your response to Assignment 1.

The reason for this reflection is to help you consider if you are willing to be criticized or misunderstood for a decision you might make **not** to counsel in some situations.

What does this person want? This is very different from the question, What problem does this person want to discuss? Jesus sometimes asked people, “What do you want Me to do for you?” (Mk 10:51).

Does the person asking for help only want sympathy? Is he or she ready to take action? Will that person listen to godly counsel? Your first goal is to listen until you can clarify what asking for your counsel really means.

A good way to begin is by asking, **“What do you hope will happen as a result of our time together?”** The answer may be very specific: “I am having a very difficult time controlling my anger at home since my mother-in-law started living

with us. I hope you can help me understand why.” A specific answer may indicate readiness to receive help.

Or the answer may be vague: “I just hate my life, and I wish everybody would leave me alone.” A vague answer may mean that this person needs to spend more time thinking about what he or she wants before you can help.



1. At this time in your life, if you were to seek help from a trusted counselor about one difficulty you are facing, what would you ask for?
2. Think of a specific example that is not too personal and write it down.



Imagine that the person asking for your counsel cannot give a concrete explanation of what he or she expects from counseling.

1. Describe how you would feel about asking that person to spend time thinking, praying, and reading God’s Word until he or she can give a specific answer.
2. If the person refuses this preliminary request, explain the probable reason behind the person’s refusal.
3. If he or she agrees to be specific, explain in a few sentences how that information will help you later in the counseling process.

A very important principle is: **Clarify what is wanted before you open the door to lay counseling.**

Can Lay Counseling Help?

What amount of help will this person need? It is reasonable to assume that lay counseling can help with what might be called “transitional adjustments.”

Life brings many changes, some of them very difficult to cope with. A time of unemployment, the death of a friend, moving to a new city away from family and friends, the birth of a first child, a time of sickness—all of these can mean difficult adjustments.

For example, a counselor received an email from friends in another country. After waiting on God and praying for several discouraging years, three months ago they received the wonderful news that she was pregnant with their first child. The email said, “For the past three months I (the wife) have been very sick because of the

pregnancy. My husband has helped me by doing all of the shopping, cleaning, and cooking. He has been running our family business without my help. Plus, he has been active in his role as an elder in our church.” The counselor concluded that if he had time to counsel with this tired husband, his listening and empathy might be a strong encouragement for the husband in this time of difficult adjustment. This is the kind of situation where lay counseling may be very effective and produce good fruit.

The passing of time alone would help many people with transitional adjustments. Eventually, they will find work or move through the grieving process or make friends. However, meeting with a lay counselor may bring encouragement that their feelings are normal. A lay counselor may bring fresh insights and suggest new steps to take. Meeting with a lay counselor may help make Jesus Christ feel near in a time of need.



1. Think about a time when you experienced a difficult “transitional adjustment.”
2. Describe the adjustment and what helped you through this process?
3. How much time passed before you felt positive again? Who offered helpful counsel to you?
4. Identify ways in which God met you in your time of need?
5. How will your history of transitional adjustments help you counsel others?



Thank the Lord now for the difficulties you have experienced and how they have put you in a position to help others. Although they may be painful at the time, the Lord has used them in your life for good and has given you experiences on the basis of which you can help others through their difficulties (2 Cor 1:3-7).

Lay counseling can help people in difficult transitions. However, some problems may take a long time to resolve. For example, people who are addicted to drugs or alcohol, or those who are confused because they have been physically abused, or those who are clinically depressed—all of these people require more help than you alone can give.

If this is so, what can you, as a lay counselor, do? You can do many important things. You can meet with them to be a good listener. You can listen for and help them identify root problems. You can discover their level of willingness to receive

help—confronting unwillingness or encouraging willingness. You can pray with them. You can suggest any resources you know about, especially passages from God’s Word or from Christian books. You can help them with a plan to discover professional help that is available.

Most long-term problems are best helped by “social influence.” Deeply troubled people are more likely to entrust themselves to others who have had similar struggles. Former alcoholics are uniquely able to help alcoholics. Families who have experienced the tragic death of a child are uniquely able to help others with this terrible loss. One of the best ways you, or your church, can give support is to help locate other believers whom God has prepared by life experiences to offer the right kind of help. This idea will be expanded in Lesson 12.

You begin helping by listening with empathy. You discuss the people who would be most helpful in the long term and pray together for God to lead the one you are counseling to them. You offer accountability to be sure God’s help is taken advantage of. You stay connected by prayer and expressions of love. All these things are immensely valuable and within the ability of a lay counselor if the person is willing to receive your help.

Am I the Best Person to Help?

Inside each one of us is a desire to be a hero. We want to be like Superman, flying from one disaster to another to save helpless victims from certain danger. In fact, one man related that, as he grew up in the church, he spent many Sunday morning worship services dreaming about how he might save the pastor from a dangerous villain who would burst into the church sanctuary wanting to harm him.

However, the truth is that God has called us to be faithful and wise servants and not superheroes. We must discern wisely what God would have us do with each opportunity to minister within the limits of who we are. Sometimes we can help significantly. Other times it would be best for the person needing help and for ourselves just to say no.

Is This a Responsibility from God?

This is a very different question from, Can I help this person? People who like to help other people love how helping other people makes themselves feel! There is a real danger in this. Helping others can become a kind of “addiction.”

How is that possible? First, people reward us for helping them. They give us their thanks and also praise us to others. That feels good. Behavior that receives a reward is reinforced, building up our self-esteem. Second, we may be afraid to say no. If we say to someone, “I’m sorry, but I cannot help you,” we can expect pointed questions, maybe even attacks on our character. People who are hurting can be very demanding. Third, guilt may drive us to overcommit in helping others. We may feel, or others

may say, “You are my only help; there is no one else.” That is a powerful statement, whether or not it is true. To decline to help in the face of that statement will almost certainly produce doubts about whether or not we “really love” this person.

Jesus can show the way out of this dilemma because He faced it in His own ministry. For an example, read Mark 1:21-39.

Jesus is in Capernaum (1:21), and this is important because it is the home of the Apostle Peter. Peter and his brother Andrew had left their father’s fishing business to follow Jesus, who was at that time a little-known rabbi with no formal training. Many people in his hometown probably thought Peter’s decision was foolish.

Imagine how Peter felt when people were “amazed” (v. 22) as Jesus taught and “amazed” even more (v. 27) when Jesus cast out a demon. People are beginning to see why Peter might follow Jesus.

Peter’s mother-in-law is convinced. Jesus heals her with a touch (v. 31). Peter’s reputation in his own family has just improved.

Now people begin gathering in the courtyard of Peter’s house—hundreds and hundreds of them (v. 33). See that big smile on Peter’s face? Soon everyone will understand Peter’s decision to follow Jesus.

Night falls before everyone is helped. The crowd returns to their homes until morning. As the sun rises, people begin gathering again, full of expectations. Peter awakens, eager for another day of miracles in his hometown. But Jesus is nowhere to be found.

Earlier, while it was still dark, Jesus had left town to pray (v. 35). Peter must have been in a panic. He calls the other apostles, and they search diligently for Jesus (v. 36). Finally, they find Jesus, and we sense great intensity in Peter’s words to Jesus, “Everyone is looking for You” (v. 37). The implication is, “Jesus, don’t you know that there are many needy people in my front yard?”

During His time of prayer Jesus had received His Father’s instruction for the day, and it was not to return to Peter’s house to help people with their problems. Rather, Jesus was to travel that day, preaching about the coming of the kingdom of God. As far as we know, the crowd at Peter’s house left disappointed in Jesus and probably also in Peter.

We learn from this that Jesus was responsible to His heavenly Father, not to people (even close friends like Peter) for His decisions. The praise of people did not influence His decisions. The fear of rejection and the needs around Him did not change His mind. He did only what the Father assigned to Him to do, and God was always “well-pleased” with His Son.



1. List at least two ways in which your pride, your fear, or others' demands can affect your decision of whom to counsel.
2. Identify two safeguards that can help you make wise decisions regarding whom to counsel.
3. List a person or two to help you make a decision about your motivations in counseling certain individuals.



Jesus provides an example for you of giving priority to God's will and calling above all else, even if it occasionally means disappointing people. Thank Him and praise Him for this encouraging example.

Is This Something I Have Time to Do?

You may not be the best person to answer this question. If you are married, then your mate is the first person you should check with. Are you fulfilling your God-given responsibilities at home? Are you faithful in other ministry responsibilities? Do you regularly feel stressed, anxious, and overburdened? Saying yes to counseling one person means saying no to someone else. How good are you at prioritizing what God has asked you to do?



Ask your mate (or a close friend) if you appear to have the time and energy to take on a ministry of lay counseling. What are his or her observations of your ability to prioritize? If there are concerns about your time pressures, what will you delete from your schedule in order to free up time?

Is This a Risk to Me Morally or Spiritually?

Even if you have the time and the problem is one that lay counseling might help, you need to be very honest with yourself about any dangers to you in spending time with this person. For example, many male pastors and church leaders have fallen into sin by counseling women from their church.

The counseling process is in one sense very intimate. Counseling often takes place behind closed doors for the sake of privacy. People are sharing their inmost

feelings with a person they trust, and the counselor is perceived as caring and sympathetic. This can be a formula for disaster.

You are encouraged to use the following guidelines for your own moral and spiritual protection:

1. Counsel only those of your gender.
2. As much as possible, counsel during normal working hours, not at night.
3. If you are married, learn to counsel as a couple. (We will talk more about this in Lesson 9.)
4. If you must counsel a member of the opposite gender:
 - a. Meet in a place where you can talk with confidentiality but where other people are present. For example, if the pastor meets with a woman in his office, there should be a church member in an adjoining room. When possible, there should be a small window in the door of the counseling room. This provides privacy for communication, but it also discourages any physical contact.
 - b. Explain from the beginning that you can meet only one or two times before referring the person to someone else.
 - c. Do what is appropriate in your own culture as far as a greeting, but avoid any unnecessary physical touch.



Write a brief response to each of the suggested guidelines for counseling sessions described above. If you do not agree with any of them, explain your reasoning.

Whom Then Should I Counsel?

Thinking about this first lesson, you might wonder if the point here is to try to talk you out of lay counseling rather than helping you learn to do it. Honestly, it is a concern that those who are “people helpers” can easily become weighed down with their ministry.

Therefore, be aware that effective lay counseling can be done only within certain limits. Lay counselors offer short-term help to those with a limited number of problems who have a God-given desire to grow and change.

The question you need to answer in your own heart is this: Does accepting the limits of lay counseling outlined in this lesson feel like God’s guidance and protection, or does it seem like I will be too limited in my ministry?

Some time ago a pastor in a growing church received a phone call at the church office. The caller was a woman who said she had big problems and needed to talk to someone. She had just looked in the phone book and called this church at random. Upon hearing this, the pastor gave the phone to one of his young assistants who then talked with the woman.

Later, the assistant asked the pastor, “Why did you give that call to me?” The pastor replied, “I once heard a sermon with the title, *If I Were the Devil*. The speaker said, ‘If I were the devil, I would find every godly pastor who desires to help people grow spiritually and bring into his life five or six people, full of problems, but just wanting sympathy. They would take up all of his time.’” This lady’s opening comments on the phone sounded to the pastor like she just wanted sympathy.



Write a response to the pastor’s line of reasoning. Explain how choosing whom we help is the first step to a fruitful ministry.



Below are a series of case studies. Read each one and then write your response in a short paragraph. In each case, say whether or not you think this is a situation where lay counseling would help. Underline key words or phrases in the case study that are the basis for your response. The first one is completed for you as an example.

Case Study #1: A young man, age 25, grew up in a family that showed him very little love but a lot of disapproval. During his teens he turned to alcohol, dropped out of school, and began living on his own. Today he is married and has a small son. His wife is a believer, and through the church he attends, he says he became a believer a year ago. He asks you for help. When you ask what kind of help, he says, “I have started drinking again. My marriage is messed up because my wife is tired all the time from taking care of our son. She says she is sorry she is always tired, but I don’t believe her. We never have any money for fun together, so I just find fun on my own. Sometimes I play computer games for hours. My job doesn’t pay enough, and I hate my boss. So now at lunch hour I leave work and go to a place to drink.” You say to him, “It sounds like a lot of things are going wrong in your life right now. You mentioned your church. What part does your church play in your life right now?” He responds, “I stopped going because I know they would judge me for drinking if they knew.” Your last question is, “What kind of help do you want me to give?” He answers, “I just need to talk to somebody.”

My response: I have some big concerns, but I might be willing to meet with him once. First I would ask a few clarifying questions. He is clearly angry, and drinking may be his way of expressing his anger. I might suggest that idea to him just to see if he agrees. If he agrees, then I might suggest that a lot of anger comes from feeling like life has no purpose or direction, that one is “trapped.” If he agrees that this might be true for him, then I might agree to meet with him one more time. My goal in meeting with him would be to listen but also to suggest to him that only by growing spiritually and by finding God’s purpose for his life will he find self-worth. In my view the root problem is spiritual immaturity that needs discipleship, not drinking or family problems that need counseling. (However, if he begins to grow spiritually, then I might meet with both of them to talk about their marriage dynamics brought about in part by a transition to being parents.) Notice the underlined key words and phrases in his story.

What responses would you add?

Case Study #2: A 30-year-old woman asks a female counselor to meet with her. She explains that she received counseling last year for several months because she was lonely and depressed. Today she is just as lonely and depressed as ever. When asked if her previous counseling helped, she says, “Not really. The counselor suggested that I develop a few hobbies or interests that would enlarge my social circle. And she suggested that I might want to improve my social skills by learning to be a better listener. I didn’t think those would help, so I stopped meeting with her.”

Would you agree to meet with this woman? Write out at least three concerns that must be clarified before having any meetings with this person.

Case Study #3: A teenage boy approaches a lay counselor for help. He has been kicked out of high school for fighting with other students. He heard about the counselor from an adult friend and just wants someone to talk to. He does not attend church, and his parents claim to be atheists. He knows the counselor is “religious,” and he is not sure how he feels about that, but he does not know anyone else who will listen to him.

Would you agree to meet with this boy? Write out a three questions you would ask the boy at the beginning of your first discussion. Then explain what you would do differently if the boy were from a Christian family.

Case Study #4: A man in his 40s asks a lay counselor for help. The man says, “I have been a Christian for almost twenty years, and I’m still a spiritual baby. I have attended church regularly most of my adult life, but I don’t really read my Bible because I don’t get a lot out of it. And I am so busy with my work that I don’t have time to do much ministry. I have a really good friend and we enjoy sports together, but he isn’t a Christian.”

Would you agree to meet with this man? Explain whether the man’s need is for counseling or discipleship or both. What are at least two conditions you should require of the man before agreeing to counsel him?

Conclusion

The best way to remember the main points of this lesson is to remember the question, Is this a **person I can help**? The first part of the lesson focuses on the word “**person**.” What is this person’s motivation in asking for my help? The second part focuses on the word “**help**.” How much help is needed? The third issue focuses on the word “**I**.” Why am I thinking about engaging in the counseling process? Am I submitting this ministry decision to God only?

This lesson has sought to show you that careful thought needs to be given before offering your counseling time to someone who asks for your help. Counseling can be effective, and God can use the counselor to change a person’s life for the better. However, like any ministry, lay counseling involves spiritual warfare. You need to be alert to danger signals, and you need to discern when God is opening the door.

Counseling too many people, counseling the wrong people, or counseling for the wrong reasons are very real dangers. You need God’s wisdom from the minute you receive a request for help. Fortunately, you know He will gladly give it.

When you must say no, let yourself be at peace. After beginning lay counseling, feel free to shorten the process if you do not believe progress is being made. There are other people you can help, and help effectively.



Spend a few moments in prayer to thank the Lord for the gifts He has given you to be able to counsel others, for the Holy Spirit to enable you to counsel others, and for the opportunities to help others with their various needs.