

Understanding Counselling – Proverbs 22:17-21

INTRODUCTION – People basically like to tell others what to do. Either they think they know better or they are the most capable. There are even post graduate degrees on counselling, which means that there are people walking around on this planet who sincerely believe that they are experts to tell others what they should or should not do in all aspects of their lives. Such control over the lives of other people is very frightening because if they listen to the counsel, and live their lives based upon it, and if the counsel is wrong, then their lives could be ruined. No amount of apology or restitution can make up for a ruined life and time lost.

Everyone knows that there are many crossroads in life for which wise counsel is needed at times. When wise counsel is given and received, it will result in right living. Conversely, when wrong or even hurtful counsel is given, lives can be destroyed. It is imperative that all believers are accurate rather than “good” counsellors. These “good” counsellors can be very effective in convincing others to receive their advice. But, if the advice is not of God, then the danger is that they are also effective in leading others astray. That is why right or accurate counselling is always better because even if the counsellor is not effective in his counselling, at least his counsel is right. It is still right even when his counsel is not accepted! Right counselling is biblical counselling which is giving counsel only from God's Word whereby man's opinions are absent.

The first basic rule of counselling is that no one can be helped if he does not want help. If he is willing to listen and be helped, he can become a wise person and a blessing to others instead of being a thorn on everyone's side. **Proverbs 1:5-6**, "*A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.*" The Book of Proverbs was written for the people of God. Therefore, every believer ought to be teachable and would want to be transformed and changed to become more like Christ. This means that there will certainly be a time in every believer's life when he will need to be counselled. The believer is a teachable student of the Word of God. The counsel can come from many directions. One does not need a piece of paper like a "diploma in counselling" from a prestigious seminary or Bible College to give counsel. Every counsellor needs to be born again and to be well versed in the Word of God.

It is not easy to help someone when the problems inside the heart are very deep. How deep you may ask? The Bible says in **Proverbs 20:5**, "*Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out.*" (antithetical parallelism) To counsel someone is like drawing water out of a deep well. A person's heart and thoughts are not seen by his actions; neither are they discovered by his words. However, a man of understanding is able to draw them out. This man of understanding is a believer and not an unbeliever. The skilful use of the Word of God will enable the counsellor to draw out the counselee's heart. Once that is done, right counsel is given to help the soul. The good knowledge of the Word of God is absolutely indispensable to achieving this task. All believers must be students of God's Word in order to be right counsellors pleasing in the sight of God and to bring blessing to others.

I. Be Safe! – Proverbs 11:14, "*Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellers there is safety.*" (antithetical parallelism) – This is a popular verse quoted by many. However, on many occasions it has been quoted out of context. The word "counsel" here means "good advice" and not just any advice. There is plenty of bad advice or counsel going around in this world. It is good sound advice that is lacking. When there is no good advice, the people will fall, including the people of God. They will fall into sin and their testimony will be ruined. It is sad that there are so many bad testimonies, that the light of the earth shines forth "dark" light instead of a bright light which is the light of Jesus Christ that leads to salvation!

In the multitude or a number of counsellors there is safety. The word "safety" does not refer to "safe" counsel as many assume. The word "safety" means "secure", as if to free someone who is in bondage. The assumption is that the people of God are in danger or captivity and need to free themselves out of the situation. It is not just the number of counsellors that matters; it is also many God centred and wise counsellors who can give advice from the same Word of God and who would probably give the same counsel. Then it is confirmation that the counsel is right. Do not forget that in the days of the OT, the people of God did not have ready access to the Word of God like we do in terms of having the Bible in their hands.

Proverbs 24:5-6, "*A wise man is strong; yea, a man of knowledge increaseth strength. 6 For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war: and in multitude of counsellors there is safety.*" – [synthetic parallelism in the two verses but both verses are synonymous parallelism in themselves] – Not only will the believer be safe; but his safety lies in his strength. He is not easily defeated by the evil one. He is able to see through the temptations and wiles of the Devil. The strength here is not physical or military in nature but spiritual. He will not easily fall into sin. He will not succumb to temptations and the ploys of Satan. He is strong in heart and mind and life which results in good character. The more he knows God's Word, the stronger he becomes. He thinks and reasons like God. He looks at this world with God's eyes. His heart is motivated like God's heart would be.

The wise believer knows when to make war. This war is spiritual in nature. In the case of Israel, they had to conquer the Promised Land when it was occupied by the Canaanites and after they occupied the Land, Israel was not to enlarge her territories like the Gentile nations. Israel was to bear a godly witness by the manner in which she lived as a nation. That is why it refers to spiritual war here rather than military, but it does not mean that it cannot be applied to military war as well. God's people are in constant spiritual danger and many wise and right counsellors giving godly advice would deliver God's people.

- II. **Be Joyous!** – **Proverbs 12:20**, "*Deceit is in the heart of them that imagine evil: but to the counsellors of peace is joy.*" [antithetical parallelism] – The contrast between the two personalities is very clear. The former has a heart filled with deceit and aims only to cheat others to get what he wants in life. Therefore he imagines evil all the time. The word for "imagine" is a strong word whereby the person engraves or carves out what he intends to do by design as if he is using a carving tool. He calculates and studies everyone like a chess piece and then he makes his move to deceive whoever can be of use to him. He takes advantage of others for personal gain because all he cares about is he. Only an unbeliever has such a heart. But to the one who is wise, who is characterized by wise counsel of peace, his heart is filled with joy. This is the joy that we get when we share the gospel and the sinner makes peace with God. This is the joy that a believer feels when his wise counsel helped heal a relationship and brought peace between two parties. Money cannot buy such joy, for it is the joy of a peacemaker which is a character of every born again believer of God.

Proverbs 27:9, "*Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel.*" [emblematic parallelism] – Ointment or oil and perfume, i.e. incense, makes the heart glad. The fragrance of perfume has that effect. It lifts up the spirit. That is why the Holy Place was always filled with incense. Using this emblem, the Word of God declares that hearty counsel produces the same effect. The word "hearty" is the word for "life or soul." His wise counsel touches the soul or gives life to the person. His wise counsel is characterized by sweetness, which means it is able to lift a person's spirit that was downcast. The wise counsellor is a man's friend, which means that his aim is to help. He is not there to make money. He has his friend's best interest at heart. There is no agenda at all of personal gain but only to help his friend find his way out of his troubles.

III. Be Right! – Proverbs 12:5, “*The thoughts of the righteous are right: but the counsels of the wicked are deceit.*” [antithetical parallelism] – The word “thought” here is the same as the word “purposes” in 15:22. This means that the imaginations of the righteous person will be right because he is righteous. However, when the person is wicked, even his counsels, i.e. good counsels (same word as used in 11:14), are deceit. This means that even when the wicked person gives good counsels, which might even be biblical, God warns the counsellee to be wary because the wicked person is here to deceive. One can find such wicked persons even in churches and institutions of theological learning like Bible Colleges and seminaries. Their potency is in their good advice. This way they get into the good books of the gullible who will be grateful because they’ve been helped out of a difficult situation. Such wicked people thrive in churches because the church is filled with many trusting and gullible people. Is this not true?

Proverbs 15:22, “*Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counsellors they are established.*” [antithetical parallelism] – The word “counsel” here refers to “a crowd.” When there is no guidance from others, purposes, i.e. imaginations, are disappointed, i.e. dissolved. It is not good when a man makes decisions by himself all the time without accountability. He needs others to discuss with him, to assist him, to evaluate and check him if he is unwise. However, in the multitude of counsellors his purposes are established, i.e. will stand. They are sure. He is joyous because he knows that what he has decided is right as there were others who helped him and confirmed his decisions.

IV. Be Teachable! – Proverbs 22:17-21, “*Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge. 18 For it is a pleasant thing if thou keep them within thee; they shall withal be fitted in thy lips. 19 That thy trust may be in the LORD, I have made known to thee this day, even to thee. 20 Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge, 21 That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth; that thou mightest answer the words of truth to them that send unto thee?*” – Using two imperatives, God wants the believer to take note of the importance of being teachable. The way to being teachable is to bow down, i.e. prostrate to the ground, the ear, which means to listen very closely. Hear the words of the wise, i.e. the Word of God. The word “hear” means to obey and do. This is done by means of a convicted heart. It is not done to please man but to please God because the believer is convinced that the perfect Word of God is good knowledge. Everywhere he goes and in all circumstances of life he will continue to do God’s Word.

The Word of God is pleasant, i.e. delightful, to the believer if he were to keep or guard it well within him. He must not allow anything that is of the world to take the Word away from him. His job, his family, his pride, the world, loving a non Christian - these are just some of the things that can overrun his life and rob the Word of God from his heart such that he will not obey God like he used to do. Christian, let the Word of God take root and bear fruit inside you. Let the Word of God become part of your conversation. Then you cannot help but speak like God in all that you say. You will be ethical and morally upright in all your dealings in the world. Nothing will frighten you because you know the truth of God’s Word.

Verse 19 states the purpose - it is that the believer's trust will be in the LORD (note the covenantal name of God here). God has made known or revealed His truth to His children so that they would be wise and know how to live victorious lives. God did not reveal His wisdom to the world but only to His children.

God has given to His people the Word of God which He calls "counsels and knowledge" in verse 20. There are two purpose clauses in verse 21 – a) That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth; b) that thou mightest answer the words of truth to them that send unto thee. The purposes of God in giving us the Word of God is so that we might know experientially the certainty, i.e. trustworthiness, of God's Truth; and God's people might be able to answer all whom they would encounter in their lives.

The person who gives counsel to others must always use God's Word as his basis, and not anything that is of man. To do so would be foolishness, for there is nothing from man that can match up to the wisdom of God.

V. Be Wise! -- Proverbs 19:20, "*Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.*" [synthetic parallelism] – It is one thing to begin well in life but to end well is another thing altogether. Using two imperatives here, God challenges the believer to pay close attention to counsel, i.e. advice, and then receive or choose or take hold of instruction. The word "instruction" refers to "chastisement", which means that even when the counsel is not to the believer's liking, he must still obey and act on it. Then he will become wise at the end of his life.

There are so many examples in the Bible of God's servants who began well but few ended well, like King David, Moses, Aaron and Miriam to name a few. Think of the end of your life even as you live in the present. The way to ensure a good and God honouring ending is to keep hearing and obeying God's Word.

Proverbs 19:21, "*There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.*" [synthetic parallelism] – The word "devices" is the word "imaginings", which is used in 12:5 (thoughts) and 15:22 (purposes). The heart of man is filled with all sorts of imaginations but the counsel of the LORD, i.e. His perfect Word, will be the thing that will stand at the end. The power of the Word of God will not be thwarted by the many ideas and notions that are bombarded by the world upon the believer. The Word of God will stand true and strong if the believer hides God's Word in his heart. If he does not study God's Word, then the many notions of the world will get the better of him and his end would be ruination. He will lose his testimony!

APPLICATION

Please listen to wise counsel from God's Word; otherwise, be prepared to pay the price. The price is a ruined life! God is always right, which means that His perfect Word is never wrong. **Proverbs 12:15,** "*The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.*" [antithetical parallelism] Not only will you have a ruined life, when you counsel others, you will ruin their lives as well.

There is nothing on earth better than the very Word of God. **Proverbs 21:30,** "*There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD.*"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that you are teachable? Is a person who is always defensive a teachable person? What are the marks of a teachable believer? Do you have these marks in your life as you relate to others, especially people dear and close to you?
2. Are you a happy Christian? Do you plot and plan to get what you want in life? Do you do so at the expense of others' well being? Is it wrong to make plans for your life?
3. Have you ever encountered a wicked person giving good counsel but with the intention to deceive you in the process? Please share an incident, if any.
4. A) Before a person shares something with you, he asks you to first promise him that you will not share it with anyone else. He says that if you do not promise, then he will not share. Will you make that promise?
B) After you promise, he shares with you that he saw his pastor with another woman (not his wife); or that he has committed adultery with a church member; or that he has committed incest with his 16 year old niece. What will you do with the information now?
5. Your friend confessed to you that he cheated during the recent preliminary exams. His results are sufficient to get him into a JC before the O level results come out in a few months' time. He confessed because his conscience bothered him, and he is a member of the church serving in the YF committee. He is seeking your counsel. How would you counsel him?