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# COUNSELING TOOLS

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*E-BOOK*

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INTRODUCTION

# THE PASTOR AS COUNSELOR

## NATHAN MILLICAN

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I imagine you or someone you know has said or thought one of the following statements regarding the issue of counseling in the life of a pastor:

- When I signed up to be a pastor I didn't sign up to be a counselor!
- I just don't have the time to counsel anyone—I'm busy enough as it is!
- Counseling is for the professionals.
- Seminary didn't equip me to counsel.
- My job is to preach the Word, not to counsel.
- I'm not gifted in the area of counseling.
- I don't counsel. I delegate that to someone else.

In recent years I have become intimately aware that my “job” as a pastor is not merely relegated to the preaching of the Word in corporate worship, but is also to be worked out in the lives of the people I serve. Further, I would submit to you that the Scriptures expect not only pastors, but also all

Christians to counsel one another with the Word of God. This expectation is seen repeatedly in the Scriptures with thirty-eight “one another” statements that all Christians are commanded to live out. (Romans 15:14; 2 Timothy 3:15-16)

That being said, SEND has put together this e-book entitled “Counseling Tools”, which seeks to provide pastors, planters, and Christians alike with tools for counseling people through a variety of habits, hurts, and hangups.

## **WHAT IS COUNSELING?**

Counseling could easily be defined as intensive discipleship. More specifically, counseling is the Spirit-empowered process of one Christian humbly and compassionately coming alongside another Christian to give words of encouragement, loving admonition and/or practical help toward the goal of becoming more like Jesus (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 3:14; Colossians 1:28).

## **BIBLICAL WARRANT FOR THE PASTOR-COUNSELOR**

Here are several passages where we can glean some counseling practices that aptly describe the role and responsibility pastors have as counselors:

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

– Acts 20:28

Despite Paul’s not using the word “counsel” or “counselor,” I believe he is prescribing to leaders in the church (namely pastors/elders) a mandate to preach the gospel publicly as well as privately in people’s lives. The private ministry of the Word (i.e. counseling) is nothing more than the intensive

discipleship of other Christians concerning their specific issues.

As Paul highlights the perilous circumstances in Ephesus, he is conveying the seriousness of the responsibility that the Ephesian leaders have in knowing the Word, knowing the sheep (not in a superficial sense but in a personal manner able to address the issues of the heart), defending the truth from false teachers, as well as equipping the flock to know and defend the truth.

Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders not only to pastor their own hearts, but also to exude that same intentionality among the flock that the Spirit of God had set them apart to care for. A shepherd spends time with the flock; a shepherd knows the flock and as the shepherd comes to know the flock he realizes there is much work to be done.

“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”

– Colossians 1:28-29

The work that is to be done by pastors is described as presenting all believers as mature or complete in Christ.

This is hard work. In fact, Paul uses the words “toil” and “struggling.” Pastoral ministry is an arduous task and not for the faint of heart. Pastors all too well understand that pastoral ministry is a difficult work that is never-ending.

Perhaps the most encouraging truth we see in these verses is that we work to see believers grow up in Jesus with God’s power and presence in our lives—we don’t do it alone!

Now that we’ve established a definition for counseling, and the biblical

warrant for the pastor as counselor, we'll continue this e-book by addressing the issue of addiction.

# ONE ADDICTION

## STEPHEN WADE

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Addictions are typically associated with alcohol and drug abuse, but when we dig deep into the human heart, we find that a clear understanding of what is going on is really a picture of the battle going on in the heart of every sinner. Pastors will find that both believers and non-believers struggle with addictive tendencies, to a greater or lesser extent, with many different things in their lives.

Indeed, the grace and power of the gospel applied to the struggle of an addict is the same grace and power that every believer needs in the battle with sin. The purpose of this chapter is to (1) offer a few foundational thoughts relative to understanding addictions biblically and (2) suggest some practical tips relative to ministering to addicts.



## UNDERSTANDING ADDICTIONS:

**Addiction is primarily a worship issue.** At the core, human beings are worshippers. The Bible describes those people or things (other than God) that control our desires and determine our behavior as “idols.” So, when someone is in bondage as an addict, the core of what is going on is misplaced worship.

**Understand the dual nature of the addict.** The Bible speaks of the sinner as both a rebel and a slave. The addict is a rebel in that he chose to befriend a substance, activity or state of mind wherein he found pleasure, comfort or perceived happiness. Along the way he begins to trust his new-found friend to deliver what only living for God’s glory can bring. This trust and friendship leads to infatuation that results in bondage. Once the addict sinks into lustful desires, he is no longer a voluntary participant but a defeated slave. Jesus states, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34, ESV). As a rebel, God’s judgment is against him. As a slave, God offers hope and freedom!

**The body of Christ is a vital part of overcoming an addiction.** God intends for the addict’s struggle (and all struggles with sin) to be a community project. This means that life and relationships must be genuine, transparent and often messy. However, it is only as the entire body of Christ is involved in the battle for holiness in the life of every believer that it can thrive as Christ intends.

## MINISTRY SUGGESTIONS:

**Build genuine relationships as a fellow struggler.** I find it helpful to greet counselees with the reminder that I am a fellow sinner and struggler. I too have addictive tendencies in my heart and am in need of grace to fight enslaving sins.

**Lovingly confront.** It is out of love that we do not overlook the addictive tendencies of addicts, but rather confront them and invite them to

the hope of Christ. If need be, we must gather others and call the addict to confess and repent. This confrontation must be with loving words and acceptance of the person in the struggle as well as include a plan to overcome.

**Offer hope, love, healing and forgiveness.** This is what every addict desperately needs: Gospel hope! Resurrection power to overcome the enemy that has them in bondage and bring healing. The addict often experiences devastating hopelessness that will crush their will to overcome addiction or even look for help. As we help, we must do so with compassion, gospel truth, and words spoken in love that assure of our commitment to the process.

**Wisely assess.** Some addicts will need the help that the normal discipleship processes of a church is already set up to provide. Some addictions will be so severe and established that intensive counseling or even a residential program will be required. The wise pastor will do what it takes to accurately assess the need and lead in the path to recovery.

**Provide ongoing accountability.** No matter how severe the addiction nor how miraculous the victory, we will struggle with sin until our salvation is fully realized at Jesus' return. So, even when an addict graduates from counseling or a recovery program, he will need the ongoing love and discipleship of the local body. This discipleship in the local church should provide the network and support every believer needs to flourish as a follower of Christ.

## TWO

# PORN

### MATT ROGERS

*Matt Rogers is the pastor of The Church at Cherrydale in Greenville, South Carolina. He and his wife, Sarah, have three daughters, Corrie Noel, Avery Elizabeth, and Willa Quinn and one son, Hudson Emmett. Matt holds a Master of Arts in counseling from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, a Master of Divinity from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a PhD in Applied Theology from Southeastern. He is the author of Aspire: Developing and Deploying Disciples in the Church, Seven Arrows: Aiming Bible Readers in the Right Direction, and Mergers: Combining Churches to Multiply Disciples.*

Porn wreaks havoc on every church. Some people cower in shame and fear, hoping that they can hide their secret forever. Others genuinely want to change, they just don't know how. Still others have tried to change, only to fall into the cycle of sin and regret yet again.

Before long every pastor will face the moment when someone walks into his office or pulls up a chair at the coffee shop and says, "We have to talk. Porn is ruining my life. I need help."

What do you say? How do you offer hope and help that goes beyond, "Well, get an accountability partner and I'll pray for you"? The answers we give in these conversations can serve to save individuals poised on the brink of destruction. So, what should we give?

## **GIVE THEM A PICTURE OF THE GRACE OF GOD**

In these moments, it is easy to run and grab a tool from our behavior-modification toolbox. The answers might include getting an accountability partner, signing up for web filtering, or avoiding traveling alone. These solutions, while vital and important, may cause us to lose sight of the ultimate basis for life transformation. We should first speak of the abundant grace of a benevolent God who shows steadfast love to His children, despite the heinous nature of their rebellion (Rom 5:8–10). Grace serves as a salve to soothe the gaping wounds caused by sin and provides a context for true healing to begin.

## **GIVE THEM A SENSE OF THEIR IDENTITY BEFORE GOD**

Porn causes people to forget their identity. Guilt and despair can easily convince believers that they have inalterably tarnished their worth before God. Thus, people are prone to sulk in self-condemnation and lose hope that change is possible. In these moments we remind them that, in God's eyes, they are a child of God, a saint, a beloved recipient of God's redemptive work (Eph 1:1). Because God's people are "bought with a price," according to Paul they should, "honor God with their bodies" (1 Cor 6:20).

## **GIVE THEM A SENSE OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR ACTIONS**

These first two affirmations need not mean that we should coddle sin or treat it lightly. Porn is not harmless. It has dastardly affects on those invested in the industry, the marriages fractured by sin, the children of those caught in the web of deceit, and the churches rendered impotent by the secret sin of their members. We must remind those we love that all sin, not just porn, has a natural trajectory—from lust, to sinful action, to death (James 1:15). People

need to hear that porn kills everything it touches.

## **GIVE THEM A ROLE IN THE MISSION OF GOD**

Porn festers in the lives of those who lack a meaningful mission. Idle time and a lack of purpose are a toxic combination for those, who spend hours dabbling between Netflix, Sportscenter, Youtube videos, social media, and porn. In its place, we can invite people to a meaningful participation in the body of Christ and aid them in finding the purpose for which they were created (Matt 28:18–20).

## **GIVE THEM MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS TO THE CHURCH**

God's church is to be a family of burden-bearing relationships (Gal 6:2). Once the sin of pornography is brought into the light, we should work to connect them to individuals who can walk alongside of them in the fight to lay aside sin. Defeating pornography is a long process. Change rarely happens overnight. We should expect seasons of growth followed by periods of regression. People need brothers and sisters in the church to walk this road with them.

## **GIVE THEM HABITS TO CONNECT THEM TO GOD**

Porn is intimately connected to the habits around which a person's life is built. They have often developed a wide array of habits that foster their sinful actions. Godly counsel aids others in re-forming godly habits that can train the heart to love the things of God (1 Thess 5:19). We can offer support in spiritual disciplines, such as Bible reading, prayer, and fasting, which are the God-given means of our sanctification. These disciplines can serve as a

natural counterpart to practices such as accountability and internet security.

What a gift pastors and church leaders have when someone brings their sin out of the darkness and into the light and asks for our help. May we be the types of leaders who offer more than sound byte platitudes or superficial principles. Let's offer the hope of the gospel as the fuel for lasting change—both for them and for us.

# THREE

# SUFFERING

## BRANDON CLEMENTS

*Brandon is a pastor and writer living in Columbia, SC with his wife Kristi and daughter Sully. He serves as the LifeGroups & Recovery Pastor at Midtown Fellowship in Columbia, SC.*

## RADICALLY UNPREPARED

I was in the 10th grade when I had my first real brush with suffering. I was closer to my grandfather than most, partly because he was also my next door neighbor and I spent a great majority of my life at the house he shared with my grandmother.

He was only 60 and after going into a routine surgical biopsy, he never woke up. He was on life support and as we were making the decision to take him off, I had a melt down in the ICU bathroom where I cried out to God, expressing that surely He wasn't going to allow this to happen. I was the good Christian boy, after all. I was walking with Him and sharing the Gospel with many schoolmates. It felt very much so like God and I had a business deal where I followed Him and obeyed, and He kept things like this from happening to me.

It felt very much so like God and I had a business deal where I followed Him and obeyed, and He kept things like this from happening to me.

Except, He didn't. We pulled him off life support and watched the breath leave his chest, the red, blinking zero on the monitor signaling a new

world that I wasn't ready for. For the longest time I didn't know what had happened or how to move forward with my relationship with God. I felt like He'd betrayed me—pulled the wool over my eyes.

Until one night I was reading an Oswald Chambers devotional (of course) and a line said:

“Until we can come face to face with the deepest, darkest fact of life without damaging our view of God's character, we do not yet know Him.”

I immediately thought: “I must not really know Him, then.”

That started a long journey of learning what a biblical theology of suffering meant.

## **NOT EVERYONE IS JABEZ**

I grew up in the church, but I was completely unprepared for suffering when I encountered it in high school. I had just enough exposure to preachers on TV and Christian subculture that, without realizing it, a form of prosperity gospel had dripped into my subconscious. I don't know if I would have said it outright, but I did believe that God and I were in a business relationship—and if I was walking with Him He would bless me and enlarge my territory and keep bad things from happening.

There are examples of people who love God having pretty great lives in the Bible. But I didn't realize in high school that those people are actually the minority—not the expectation. Many faithful, God-fearing people had really difficult lives full of suffering (Paul and Jesus come to mind quickly).

Hebrews 11 is my favorite passage that totally blows the prosperity gospel to pieces. This great “Faith Hall of Fame” passage mentions so many who were faithful and their lives had very different outcomes. Verse 33 picks up and describes faithful people who:



“...conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection.”

**And then, literally in the middle of verse 35, the outcomes change drastically:**

“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

**The first time I actually heard this passage taught correctly, I was like, “What?! Are you kidding me? All were faithful, and the first group got these amazing things and the second group got the exact opposite?”**

**Put that in your prosperity pipe and smoke it.**

## DO NOT BE SURPRISED

The default nature of human beings is works-based righteousness. We tend to naturally think of our relationship with God as a performance or a business deal. Add that onto the fact that a lot of very explicit prosperity gospel (and also more sneaky versions) has been taught in American evangelicalism and you get a perfect recipe for disenchantment.

Pastors, your churches are full of people that were exactly like me in the 10th grade. People who are not prepared for the waves of suffering that will crash into their lives. So we need to teach them, early and often, what the Bible actually says about suffering. Which is actually summed up fairly well in 1 Peter chapters 4 and 5.

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

– 1 Peter 4:12-13

“Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

- 1 Peter 4:19

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to de-

vour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

- 1 Peter 5:6-11

I love the language of 1 Peter 4: “do not be surprised...as though some strange thing were happening to you.” When my grandfather died much earlier than we wanted him to, I thought some strange thing was happening. I didn’t know that unexpected suffering is a normal part of living in a world ravished by sin and its effects on creation. I didn’t know that I was never promised a peachy life, so I have no right to grow bitter and resentful if God doesn’t give me the circumstances I want.

I didn’t fully realize that God had already proved His goodness towards me in the cross of Jesus, and that no circumstance that I ever encounter could change that. I didn’t know that Jesus is such a great reward that at the end it doesn’t really matter if you’re in the first group of Hebrews 11 or the second group—He is so valuable that any differences we experience on the way to Him will become inconsequential with time.

I didn’t know any of this, and what I had heard evidently had not sunk in yet. I don’t think we can ever tire of teaching this—so pastors, church leaders, everyday ordinary Christians—let’s teach and disciple people in a healthy, biblical theology of suffering.

## FOUR

# PREMARITAL PLAN

### JON LUDOVINA

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For almost a decade I've been pastoring a church plant in the heart of downtown Columbia, SC. When you've got a young church with lots of college students and young professionals, a couple things are true.

First, you're broke.

Second, your people are dating, hooking up and getting married constantly. My wife and I once attended and/or officiated 17 weddings in one summer. As our culture continues to foster its own view of marriage that focus on autonomous, happiness-based, romance-idolizing relationships, you need a gameplan for premarital counseling that gets to the heart of what matters without wasting your time and theirs.

### DON'T ASSUME THE GOSPEL.

If they're not a Christian, they need the gospel. If they are a Christian, they need the gospel. They don't just need marriage tips and tricks or new laws to obey. They need a Savior who created marriage, redeems sinful spouses and empowers sinful spouses to survive the years of pain, excitement,

disappointment and joy that are coming (1 Corinthians 15:1-10, Ephesians 5:31-32).

## **DON'T ASSUME THEY HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT MARRIAGE IS ABOUT.**

You have to ask them, “Why are you getting married?” And don’t be surprised when their answers are lacking. The cultural marriage waters they swim in tell them marriage is about maximizing compatibility to maximize happiness. That’s a terrible, flawed, weak foundation. To correct this view, you may use helpful books like Tim Keller’s *The Meaning of Marriage*, John Piper’s *This Momentary Marriage*, Matt Chandler’s *The Mingling of Souls*, and Dave Harvey’s *When Sinners Say I Do*.

## **GIVE THEM A GAME PLAN FOR DEALING WITH THEIR SIN.**

If they don’t have a game plan for sin, then they don’t have a snowball’s chance at living out a gospel-centered, God-glorifying marriage. Dave Harvey’s *When Sinners Say I Do* is a great primer here. Help them understand how to proactively confess and confront in order to bring sin into the light. Help them know how to walk in forgiveness and repentance so that reconciliation is full and sweet and bitterness won’t have any soil in which to grow (1 John 1:5-10, Hebrews 12:15).

## **ASSUME SEXUAL SIN.**

Not only are most millennials having sex outside of God’s design, they also have no idea what God designed sex for and why sexual sin is sin at all. If you’re skittish, awkward and cowardly around the topic of sexual sin, your people will continue in unrepentant sin and you will give account to Jesus for why you didn’t graciously confront and help them. Ask them direct and pointed follow-up questions that force the issue. Yes, make them be specific.

No, don't act weird or overreact as if their sexual sin is shocking or worse than other kinds of sin. We're not aiming for perfect people. We're aiming for mature Christians who love Jesus, understand God's good design and repent of sin when they're confronted (1 Thess. 4:3-8).

## **MAKE THEM FIGHT.**

Couples who fight a lot are more likely to know the weakness, and therefore more likely to ask for and receive help. It's the non-squeaky wheel couples who are nice and polite and never fight who are more in danger. They will either continue to avoid conflict and not grow in unity or find themselves fighting with no idea how to do that well. If they don't fight a lot, make them fight during engagement under your watchful care so you can coach them up.

## **MAKE COUNSELING A TEAM SPORT.**

Broad truths effect all marriages. Each individual marriage applies those truths in different ways. So part of our premarital counseling track is to eat dinner with three married couples in our church family and ask them specific questions about marriage. You get to follow up with what they learned and coach them up if/when they get bad/questionable advice (Proverbs 15:22).

As is the case in all counseling situations, helping them arrive at gospel-centered, biblical answers is more helpful than spoonfeeding them the answers. Ask hard questions. Coach them up when they're off. Give them engaging interactives so that you can help shape their discernment. In the end, pray and counsel them in such a way to help them see how their marriage makes the most sense and comes alive in light of the cosmic marriage made possible by Jesus dying for the church.

## FIVE

# ANGER

### **BLAND MASON**

*Bland planted City on a Hill Church in Boston in 2010 and serves as the lead pastor. He and his wife, Teresa, have three kids. They moved their family to Boston in 2008 to spend the rest of their lives investing in a church planting movement in the city and region. He holds an M.Div. and a Ph.D. from Southern Seminary and has taught adjunct for Campbellsville University and Boyce College. Bland serves on the side as the chapel leader for the Boston Red Sox.*

“What’s wrong with that idiot?” cried my three-year-old daughter from the comfort of her booster seat in the backseat of our family car. She was referring to the guy who just cut us off in traffic. I was going to say something about the driver but she beat me to it. I had an anger problem when I drove and my daughter, with her handful of what she called “animal kwackus,” was mirroring it back at me. I was creating a monster and I was the model.

### **WHAT’S EATING YOU?**

Lots of things make us angry: our team losing, a friend forgetting our birthday, being hungry (“hangry”), a child being abused, or traffic (a personal favorite of mine). If you see all anger as the same, you have blurred the lines between injustice against God and his will and threats against your sovereign little kingdom. Treating all these types of anger the same says more about you than it does about the circumstances that make you angry.

## **ANGER & INJUSTICE**

All anger is rooted in a sense of injustice. Anger rises in us when we feel we have not gotten what we think we deserve, whether that be kindness from another person or compliance to our will on the road. The situation happens, catches us off guard, and we begin processing in our minds

- “I thought this person would do what I wanted.”
- “I thought my computer would function perfectly at all times.”
- “I thought my kids would always be polite and obedient.”

Righteous anger is processing these situations with God and the gospel in mind. When our anger is unrighteous, we are, in essence, crying out in our hearts, “Why is everything not conforming to MY will?”

## **AGREEING WITH GOD**

Sometimes our anger flows from perceiving a legitimate injustice. We get angry over...

- the murder of the unborn
- racism and other discrimination
- God’s name being blasphemed, etc.

This type of anger is inline with our God-given sense of justice and is not sinful (though what we do with it may be). Righteous anger is agreeing with God in a situation and trusting him to bring judgment in his time and way.

## **JUSTICE’S EVIL TWIN**

Often we mistake the two types of anger (legitimate/illegitimate) and substitute our sense of justice for God’s sense of justice. In this way we take the beautiful and holy sense of justice God has given, and re-orient to our way of thinking and in doing so, we give rise to justice’s evil twin, unrighteous anger.



## ANGER'S LONG-TERM COMPANION

The longer we hold the false sense of injustice against someone else, the more likely we are to let bitterness give root. Bitterness is a long-term, settled disposition of anger toward another person. It chooses to make their sin (or perceived sin) the focus of how you relate to the other person, at least in your heart.

Paul David Tripp, says, “Harboring bitterness against people is actually confessing their sin to myself, over and over again. Anger is akin to confessing their sin to God, dissatisfied that he hasn’t done something and placing myself in his position as judge.” Bitterness reveals that we do not understand the gospel of our own forgiveness.

## BE GOOD AND ANGRY

Is the answer to NOT get angry? That’s not possible and I’m not sure it’s even healthy to never get angry. Here are a few guidelines for fighting unrighteous anger.

1. **Ask “Why am I angry?”** The key is asking the question of yourself at the moment when anger rises in your heart. Is the reason a legitimate injustice or just one you have perceived in your mind?
2. **Own it when you are not good and angry.** Repent to God and others when your anger isn’t godly. Anger can damage relationships and repentance helps restore. It also forces you to admit your anger problem to others, which can have a positive impact the next time you feel a blow up coming.
3. **Pray for deliverance from unrighteous anger.** Your prayer may involve accepting that you like the power anger gives you. A friend of mine used to struggle with unrighteous anger and prayed for God to deliver him. One day when praying in this way, he sensed God saying, “I will deliver you when you are honest and admit you like the power that anger gives you.”

4. **Grow in applying the gospel to your own heart and grace to others.** Remind yourself, “I am forgiven, therefore I forgive. I am understood by God, therefore I seek to understand. I do not experience wrath, therefore I don’t go off on others.”

## SIX

# RECOVERY

### BRANDON CLEMENTS

*Brandon is a pastor and writer living in Columbia, SC with his wife Kristi and daughter Sully. He serves as the LifeGroups & Recovery Pastor at Midtown Fellowship in Columbia, SC.*

### THE DARKNESS RUNS DEEP

I've done recovery ministry for six years, and it didn't take long for me to stop being surprised when people told me about the issues they are dealing with. Addiction, sexual brokenness, substance abuse, uncontrollable anxiety, eating disorders—these and many more are no respecter of persons, cultures, economic classes, or family backgrounds.

Every person you see each day is far more broken than you'll ever know, just like you are far more broken than the many people you interact with daily know.

Sin, and the effects of sin in our world, cause profound scars and overwhelming battles for people. In our church, we ask people what sins feel “unbeatable” in their lives and we have gotten answers from all over the map. Satan has indeed come to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10).

### LIGHT IS NEVER AFRAID OF DARKNESS

The good news is, John 10:10 doesn't stop with the popular line about our spiritual enemy—it goes on to say that Jesus came “that they may have life

and have it abundantly.”

When the sun peaks up over the horizon each morning, it does not do so in fear. It is not intimidated by the darkness in any way—it races forth and conquers the darkness in a “no contest” event.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

– John 1:5

We will never be 100% free from the effects of sin in our earthly lives, but Jesus has not called us to sit in our church pews and remain silent about the idols and sins that are eating us alive. He has provided us a means to recover our original design of being humans who walk with and reflect the very image of our God through the power of the Holy Spirit inside of us.

He has provided us a means to recover our original design of being humans who walk with and reflect the very image of our God through the power of the Holy Spirit inside of us.

## **TWO KEYS TO RECOVERY: THE GOSPEL & COMMUNITY**

In our recovery ministry, we teach that the most important things for our growth are applying the gospel to all areas of our lives in the midst of genuine, transparent Christian community. This is actually laid out beautifully in John 3:19-21:

“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is

true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Verse 19 tells us why we hate bringing our issues out into the light of community—we are sinful people and we hate being exposed as that. We want to have our act together, to be impressive and strong. But Jesus says our refusal to come out into the light of community for healing is actually an evil pride.

Verse 21 tells us the gospel—our works “have been carried out in God.” There is nothing we have to earn, because Jesus has earned our righteousness for us! It also tells us that whoever understands the gospel fully will walk out into the light of community, because he will understand he has nothing to hide. He can fully expose his issues because

People don’t need another self-improvement strategy or technique. Ultimately people need the good news of the gospel applied to their specific struggles and sins, and that happens best in a group of believers who are committed to pushing one another towards Jesus, speaking truth in love and watching out for each other’s blind spots.

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There is massive freedom alone in exposing your deepest darkness to the light of Christ in a Christian community who will remind you of Jesus’ love for you when you forget it.

## **GOSPEL FLUENCY**

Once you get into the ring with others and the real stuff starts coming out, you are going to need more than trite platitudes or helpful advice. Again, people need to hear, to be reminded of the gospel, over and over again. In

the middle of overwhelming sin issues and struggles, it's hard to believe that Christ actually still loves you, that your approval and standing before God isn't based on your performance. We cannot tire of reminding people of the gospel!

This chart is a helpful reminder of how to give people the gospel and not only advice:

- **Advice:** Typically starts with some version of “You just need to...”
- **Good News:** Typically starts with some version of “In Christ you are...” (Righteous, justified, made new, clean, loved, adopted, etc.)
- **Advice:** Primarily focuses on behavior modification and accountability.
- **Good News:** Does not neglect accountability, but does not stop there—it digs deeper and focuses on the heart change that will lead to behavior change.
- **Advice:** About what you should do.
- **Good News:** About what Jesus has done on your behalf.
- **Advice:** Makes people feel increased pressure.
- **Good News:** Makes people feel relieved from pressure.

(Jeff Vanderstelt, a pastor in Washington, has some helpful teaching on gospel fluency on Youtube for anyone interested.)

## SIN IS A WORSHIP ISSUE

Another extremely helpful thing for people to realize is why they are chasing after their particular sin issues. Idolatry is a central theme in the Bible, and it illustrates that we ultimately chase after and devote ourselves to what we think is going to bring us satisfaction.

Tim Keller says, “You worship your way into sin, and you worship your way out.” The only way to displace an affection is to uproot it with a much

stronger affection--the same way the guy Jesus describes in Matthew 13 saw a pearl in a field and went and sold everything he had to buy the field. In order to truly change we have to see that Jesus is much more worthwhile than our idols and let deeper desires displace our surface desires for sin.

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Psalm 16 illustrates this point well: verse 4 says “The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply.” But verse 11 goes on to say “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

Speaking the good news of the gospel to someone battling a sin issue that feels unbeatable means telling them over and over that Jesus is the good life—the only true fountain of joy. Anything else will only prove to let them down and multiply their sorrows.

As ministers of the gospel to the broken and overwhelmed, let’s echo the invitation of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah:

“Come, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and he who has no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.  
Why do you spend your money  
for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.  
Incline your ear, and come to me;  
hear, that your soul may live.”