

LOVE
KNOW
SPEAK

► DO

14

INSTILLING IDENTITY WITH CHRIST AND PROVIDING ACCOUNTABILITY

As we continue examining the ways God can use us to help people change, think about your own life for a moment. Aren't you also a person in need of ministry? Whether you are an influential Christian leader or a brand new believer, if you examine your life, you will see that you too need the ministry of others.

This chapter examines the fact that encouragement and accountability are important parts of the truth application process. Scripture makes it clear that we were never created to live in isolation. God designed us to live in community, first with him and then with one another. According to the Bible, personal change is a community project. In fact, it is in the process of change that we really begin to see our need for one another. My need for others is not because I am a moral or intellectual cripple in a world of healthy people. Rather, God created us to be dependent on each other to live life righteously, just as he created us to be dependent on his revelation to interpret life accurately.

► OBJECTIVE 3:
INSTILL IDENTITY IN CHRIST.

THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING WHO YOU ARE

People need encouragement as they pursue the hard work of change. They need truths that will motivate and strengthen them.

The gospel motivates us not only with the presence of Christ and the surety of his promises, but also with our brand new identity. In passages like Romans 6:15–17 and 1 John 3:1–3, Scripture lays out this new identity for us. We learn that we are not only forgiven, but have in fact been adopted into the family of God. We are children of the King of Kings! The God of the universe is our Father!

Another way the New Testament describes this dramatic new identity is to say that we are “in Christ.” This means that we have been fully united to him and received all he has promised us. This goes far beyond the fact that we have been forgiven and are going to heaven. Something more fundamental has happened. Paul describes it in Ephesians 2:6–7: “And God raised us up *with Christ* and seated us *with him* in the heavenly realms *in Christ Jesus*, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us *in Christ Jesus*.” John 15 captures this identity with a metaphor, saying that as believers we are like branches attached to a vine. We can only bear fruit because of our union with Christ the Vine. We have life because we are “in” the Vine.

All of this is important in times of change because we always live out of some kind of identity, and the identities we assign ourselves powerfully influence our responses to life. As people pursue the process of lifelong change, they need to live out of a gospel identity. They, like us, need to be reminded of who they are again and again.

In the press of everyday life, it is easy to forget who we are. As we try to replace old behaviors with new ones, it is easy to take our eyes off our status as children of God. In fact, the longer we struggle with a problem, the more likely we are to define ourselves by that problem (divorced, addicted, depressed, co-dependent, ADD). We come to believe that our problem is who we are. But while these labels may describe particular ways we struggle as sinners in a fallen world, they *are not* our identity! If we allow them to define us, we will live trapped within their boundaries. This is no way for a child of God to live!

There is a radical difference between saying, “I am a depressed person,” and saying, “I am a child of God ‘in Christ’ and I tend to struggle with depression.” The second statement does not pretend

that the war isn’t raging, but it is infused with hope. It says, “Yes, I wrestle with depression every day, but I am not alone. I do not rest on my own strength and wisdom. I have come to understand that my Creator and Savior is also my Father. I am beginning to grasp how rich I really am because of my place in his family, and I am learning to live out of the riches he has provided, rather than the poverty of the identities I used to assign myself.” It is never a waste of time to remind people of who they are in Christ. Doing so stimulates hope, courage, and faith.

One of the best identity passages in the New Testament is 2 Peter 1:3–9. Study it until it has mastered you! This passage should be a tool you can use wisely, practically, and well with others.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

Let’s examine the important points of this passage.

- ◆ Peter acknowledges in verse 8 that there will be people who know the Lord, but whose lives are ineffective and unproductive. Maybe their home is a war zone. Perhaps they are con-

sumed with bitterness or are resistant to those in authority. Whatever the issue, their lives have not produced the good fruit you would expect from someone with the full rights and privileges of a child of God.

- ◆ Peter says in verses 5–8 that these people do not produce the expected fruit because they are missing essential character qualities (faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love). But Christ lived, died, and rose so that they *would* possess these qualities.
- ◆ When we see Christians who do not exhibit Christian character or produce good fruit, we ought to ask why. What is missing? Peter's answer is, "These people have forgotten who they are" (v. 9). They have lost sight of their identity in Christ, so they do not realize the resources that are theirs. Because of this, they fail to live with hope, faith, and courage. Their problems worsen and new layers of difficulty are added. This heightens their potential to walk through life with a problem-based identity. There are probably more people living like this than we would ever imagine. When I work through this passage with people, I am frequently impressed by how often they respond as if they have never heard these truths before. Their sense of who they are has usually been shaped by their problems.
- ◆ Another significant aspect of our identity is that in Christ we have been given "everything we need for life and godliness" (v. 3). As children of God, we are rich! We don't just have *some* things; we have all we need! God supplies his children with everything they will ever need to do what he has called them to do.

Notice the tense of the verb in verse 3. Peter says that everything "has been given." The verb is in the perfect tense, which refers to an action in the past that has continuing results into the future. The giving has already been done; it is not something we have to wait for. As a result of the work of Christ, everything we need for "life and godliness" has been

placed in our storehouse. The two words here are not redundant; Peter is making an important distinction. God has not only provided all we need for eternal life, but for godliness as well. Godliness means living a God-honoring life from the time I am accepted into God's family until the time I join him in eternity. We have been given everything we need to think, desire, speak, and behave in a God-honoring way. What an awesome provision!

This gospel identity and its amazing resources are a powerful defense in the war for our hearts. As people step out in new obedience, the Enemy will come to them and say, "You don't have what it takes to do this. If only you had _____ or _____, then maybe you could, but you don't." In these moments, the war for the heart is a war of identity. How people respond to Satan's attacks depends on the identity they have embraced. Unfortunately, many people leave God out of the story when they talk about their troubles. They are preoccupied by the sins of others and the difficulties of the situation. But if there is no God in their story, there will be no biblical sense of identity, because biblical identity is always rooted in him. The Enemy knows that he doesn't have to tempt us to forsake the faith to get a victory. He wins daily skirmishes with us by clouding or attacking our identity.

When you forget your identity and the riches that are yours in Christ, you live like a poor person. In Philadelphia, it has been reported that 3,500 homeless people live on the streets. Their lives are little more than finding something to eat and somewhere to sleep. At the end of the day, they are happy simply to have a place to lay their head in peace. They don't ask for more.

Many people in the midst of a struggle live as if they were spiritually homeless. They live the same survivalist, distracted, fearful, escapist, and "for the moment" existence. They do not think about growth and change or pursue the good things that are their inheritance as children of God.

They just try to get through the day. They live as if they were poor, when, in fact, they are amazingly rich.

When we live with a poverty identity, the problem is not that we ask too much of the Father, but that we settle for too little. We settle for hammering together some kind of spiritual survival with the hope that things will be better in eternity. But the Bible never presents our life on earth as a meaningless time of waiting for the good stuff that comes later. The biblical model of waiting is not simply about what you will get at the end of your wait, but about who you will become *as* you wait. God has promised you real, abundant life in the here and now. We have a Father. We have a home. We are rich. We *struggle* a great deal, but we can *expect* much as well.

- ◆ In verse 4, Peter tells us what to expect of the great provision God has made for us in Christ. God's purpose is not that we would be personally happy (nice job, marriage, family, church, neighborhood, vacation, retirement), but that we would become participants in his divine nature! In doing this, God is addressing my most significant need. This need is not external or emotional, but moral. What we need most is a heart ruled by the Lord rather than by "evil desires." We need to be progressively freed from our slavery to the god-replacements that imprison us in self-absorbed pursuit of our own glory.

Peter's point is that if my heart is ruled by evil desires, I will participate in the "corruption of the world" rather than the work of Christ. I will not have a harvest of good fruit. Too many Christians think they do what they do *because* of what they have experienced. Peter reverses the order. Rather than the corrupt world causing us to have evil desires, Peter says that our evil desires cause the corruption of the world! Scripture, in all its earthy honesty about the trouble we experience in this world, always brings us back to the heart. And it comforts us with the gospel promise of the heart-transforming, life-changing grace of Jesus Christ.

A subtle monasticism still exists in the church today. The theology of the monastery taught, "It's an evil world out there, so the way to be pure is to separate from it." Yet history records that the monastery duplicated all the ills of the surrounding society. Why? Because they made a tragic mistake: They let people in! And as sinful people came in, they brought with them the full range of evil desires, corrupting the very environment that was their hope of purity.

Peter's model is very different. It is an inside-out model. God has made ample provision for the progressive change of my heart, so that as I deal with the problems of life in a fallen world, I can do what is right and reap a harvest of good fruit. Peter is saying that the most significant thing God saves us from is ourselves! Because of his abundant grace, we no longer have to live enslaved to ourselves, but for "him who died for us and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:15).

If we apply these truths to Sharon and Ed (from chapter 10), we see that they are both trapped in their own heart environment. Sharon is convinced that Ed is her greatest problem; Ed is convinced that Sharon is his. Neither one wants help for him- or herself. It's not that they want too much from their Father; they are willing to settle for far too little! Their marriage has been corrupted by their own desires, many of which were in place before they got married. If they fail to deal with these heart issues, their marriage will either be locked into a cycle of blame and recrimination, or they will divorce and repeat their mistakes in new relationships. This is why identity issues are so important. They are not icing on the cake. They *are* the cake.

- ◆ Finally, Peter tells us what will happen when we start living out of our identity in Christ (vv. 5–8). It will change the way we live. We will not settle for a little bit of Christian character. We will not see our relationships and situations as dangers to be avoided, but as opportunities to experience what already belongs to us in Christ. We will be expectant and active be-

cause we have a progressive growth paradigm for life. We will not give in to patterns of avoidance, escape, or defense. We will not settle for a slightly better marriage, or marginally honest relationships. Each day we will want to experience more of the resources that are ours as children of God. This expectant, progressive model of change is critical for people applying new insights and commitments to their lives. Let me illustrate.

Imagine that I get a call one afternoon from a bank officer who informs me that I have inherited \$50 million from a distant relative. I get off the phone quite excited to tell Luella of our newfound fortune. I then run down to the bank, produce the requisite documents and withdraw \$10,000 to take Luella out to eat (in Paris, for the weekend of her life!). Six weeks later, Luella, who does the finances in our family, is still struggling to stretch dimes into dollars. Confused, she says to me, "Paul, I thought you said we were rich beyond anything we thought we would ever experience. Yet we are living as if we are as poor as we have ever been. Why aren't we living out of the inheritance you were given?"

Imagine me saying to Luella, "Do you know how hard it is to get down to that bank and draw out that money? First, the bank is in the center of the city. The traffic is unbelievable and the parking is worse. When you get to the bank you have to stand in one of those long, Disney World lines, and when you finally get to the counter, they treat you more like a criminal than a customer. [The bank has a fingerprinting pad next to each teller window for those who make major withdrawals.] It's too much of a hassle!"

If you were Luella, wouldn't you be thinking, *You're rich! How can anything keep you from the inheritance you have been given and the life it would give us? You need to keep going to that bank until you have received everything that is rightly yours!*

Peter ties our ability to persevere through difficulties to our grasp of our identity in Christ and the resources that come with it. If we really understand it, we will make every effort to obtain more and more of what is ours in Christ. He has promised to progressively conform our sinful hearts to the likeness of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

As we apply new insights and make new commitments, this is the identity we need. But just like heroes of our faith, we will tend to forget who we are. Moses said, "Who am I, that I should go?" and Gideon said, "But Lord, how can I save Israel?" We need to be continually reminded of our status as children of God and our spiritual resources in Christ.

Philippians 2:1–12 is another helpful identity passage, particularly because of its "if-then" construction. Verse 1 gives us the "ifs" by listing four redemptive realities in the life of every believer:

- ◆ If you have been encouraged by your union with Christ
- ◆ If you have experienced the comfort of Christ's love
- ◆ If you have enjoyed fellowship with his indwelling Holy Spirit
- ◆ If you have experienced God's tenderness and compassion

Verses 2–12 give us the "thens" by detailing how we should live in light of the grace we have been given as children of God:

- ◆ Then be one in spirit and purpose (v. 2).
- ◆ Then do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit (v. 3).
- ◆ Then consider others better than yourselves (v. 3).
- ◆ Then look not only to your own interests, but also to those of others (v. 4).
- ◆ Then make sure your attitude is the same as Christ's (vv. 5–8).

The if-then structure of this passage provides a practical description of what it means to live in light of my identity in Christ, including the radical heart changes that God is progressively working in me by his grace. Imagine what would happen to Sharon and Ed's marriage if they began to live this way! Think of the changes that would

take place if humble, unified, loving service replaced proud, self-interested, demanding disunity. They do not have to live as they are living. They have already been given something better in Christ.

► **OBJECTIVE 4:
PROVIDE ACCOUNTABILITY.**

THE GIFT OF LOVING ACCOUNTABILITY

Like the concept of confrontation, the concept of accountability tends to carry negative connotations. People can conjure up intrusive images when they hear the word. Yet the biblical picture is very loving in at least two ways. First, as we help restore people to where God wants them to be, we are called to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2). We are also told to fight the deceitfulness of sin by “encouraging one another daily” (Heb. 3:13). We must love people enough to do more than expose wrong, pronounce right, and walk away. Accountability requires a willingness to roll up our sleeves and get alongside people as they fight the war between sin and righteousness.

In personal ministry we call people to exercise faith in new and deeper ways—to forsake things they have done for years and do things they have never done before. We call them to new motives, purposes, and goals. We call them to make peace where there has been war, to serve where they have demanded and controlled. We call them to give up things that have been precious, and to do all these things not just once, but with long-term commitment and perseverance.

Yet as people step out in faith, they are often still confused and afraid. They have committed to a new and better way, but they are not yet ready to be on their own. The disciples provide a wonderful example of this phenomenon. They had been with Jesus for three years and seen the glory and power of his presence. They had learned much about the kingdom of God, but in many ways they were still wobbly and uncertain. In his last few moments with them before the cross, Jesus recognized that they were not ready to be on their own.

(See John 16:12–16.) Their fear and confusion at his crucifixion (which Jesus had warned them was coming) reveal what spiritual babies they were. Confused and afraid, they hid together, wondering what to do next. Even after they saw the resurrected Christ, they were still asking the wrong questions (Acts 1:7–11). But Jesus didn’t leave his wobbly disciples alone. He sent the Holy Spirit to guide, teach, encourage, warn, convict, and strengthen them.

God calls us to the same ministry by the power of the same Holy Spirit. He calls us to stand with people as they step out in faith, obedience, and courage. This is the ministry of accountability. It is not about lying in wait to catch them doing wrong. The purpose of accountability is to assist people to do what is right for the long run. It provides a presence that keeps them responsible, aware, determined, and alert until they are able to be on their own. It directs eyes that have just begun to see, and strengthens weak knees and feeble arms. We seek to encourage flagging faith and to keep God’s goals before people’s eyes. We help them to understand when they need to flee from sin and when they are called to stand and fight.

Like all personal ministry, accountability is incarnational. By standing alongside people, we incarnate the presence of the Holy Spirit who is not only *with* them but *in* them. We preach the gospel of an ever-present Redeemer who doesn’t just command, but enables. He doesn’t just convict; he forgives and restores. Biblical accountability is not fearful, abusive, or intrusive. It is loving, sacrificial, ambassadorial, incarnational, and holy. How could we serve Immanuel (“God with us”) and do anything less?

By contrast, accountability is not about being a private detective, trying to do the work of the Holy Spirit, being someone else’s conscience, forcing someone to obey, chasing someone who is running, or looking for someone who is hiding. Accountability provides loving structure, guidance, encouragement, and warning to someone who is fully committed to the change God is working in his life. *The person who makes accountability work is always the person being held accountable.* He doesn’t see our presence and help as scary or intrusive. He doesn’t run and hide from it. Rather, he is glad to know that as

others stand with him, God stands with him. Accountability works because he is a seeker, not a runner. The runner doesn't need accountability; he needs rebuke. Accountability is help for those who are committed to change.

WHAT ACCOUNTABILITY PROVIDES

Accountability provides help on a practical level in ways like these:

Accountability provides structure. Life is often messy and chaotic. Change seems easier to discuss than to actually achieve, so accountability provides an outside system of structure ("Do these things during this period of time") that can be immensely helpful to someone attempting something for the first time.

Accountability provides guidance. Often a person will want to do what is right but won't be sure how to do it. It is a great benefit to have someone provide practical, ongoing wisdom as to the *where*, *when*, and *how* of change.

Accountability provides assistance. There are times when a person is afraid to make the needed changes alone (for example, a difficult talk with a wife, friend, or child) and needs someone to help him do it.

Accountability provides encouragement. Change is hard, beating at the borders of people's faith, courage, and hope. People are often tempted to question their commitments or even quit. They need someone they trust alongside them, who knows their inner struggle and can encourage them to continue. They need someone to incarnate the presence of the One who is their help and hope.

Accountability provides warning. Sometimes people confess their need for change, but begin to rebel against it when they realize the cost and work involved. These people need to be warned of the consequences of their disobedience and rebellion. They need to be reminded that they will reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7).

Accountability brings ongoing help to the person who is fully committed to the "put off/put on" process. Ask yourself three questions as you seek to provide such accountability:

1. What kinds of ongoing help will this person need?
2. How often will I need to be in contact with him or her for change to continue?
3. Are there other resources in the body of Christ that would be helpful during this period? How can I connect this person to these resources?

Change in a fallen world can be burdensome. As people bring new insights and commitments to their lives, they need to be reminded of their identity in Christ and the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

THE SIMPLICITY AND GRANDEUR OF PERSONAL MINISTRY

If you were to summarize this book, what would you say? Perhaps you would describe it as a book of strategies for personal change. Maybe you would say it is about counseling in the local church. Some might say it explains how to bring Scriptural principles to the problems of life. Others might say it is about the necessity of personal ministry in the body of Christ.

All of these answers would be correct, but this book is first of all a call to live a daily ministry lifestyle rooted in God's Word. We have laid out a whole Bible, whole life, whole body lifestyle. This lifestyle doesn't look to the Bible as an encyclopedia for problem solving, but finds in God's great story a perspective that transforms the way we deal with the circumstances of life.

Second, this book is rooted in the belief that God has called and positioned all of his children to live as his ambassadors. His claim is on all of our time and each of our relationships as we serve as his representatives.

Finally, this lifestyle is not simply for the few who are privileged to minister as a career. God's kingdom work involves every member of the body of Christ. Whether you are a child, a spouse, a neighbor, a relative, a pastor, an employer or employee, a teacher, a student, or a friend, all of your relationships must reflect your ambassadorial calling. You must always seek to faithfully represent his message, methods, and character. God sends unfinished people to unfinished people with the message of his grace so that he can reclaim every heart for his glory.

CORE TRUTHS OF AN AMBASSADORIAL LIFESTYLE

We have seen that eight principles and perspectives characterize this ministry lifestyle.

Truth #1. We need God and his truth to live as we were meant to live (Gen. 1:26; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). We need to forsake any delusion of autonomy or self-sufficiency. We cannot figure life out on our own nor do what God calls us to do. Our utter dependence on the Lord is not rooted in the Fall, but in our humanity. We were created to worship the Lord and depend on him.

Truth #2. Each of us has been called by God to be his instruments of change in the lives of others, beginning with our families and the church (Eph. 4:11–16; Col. 3:15–17). Ministry is not an activity that takes place outside our primary relationships. Rather, God intends to use us *in* these relationships as he does his redemptive work.

Truth #3. Our behavior is rooted in the thoughts and motives of our hearts. People and situations only prompt our hearts to express themselves in words and actions (Prov. 4:23; Luke 6:43–45; Mark 7:20–23; Matt. 23:25; James 4:1–10). Without denying the sad realities of suffering and being sinned against, we must reject any view of human behavior that forgets the heart. Instead, we affirm that God changes people's lives as his grace transforms their hearts. Thus, in personal ministry, no matter what the difficulty, the heart is always our target.

Truth #4. Christ has called us to be his ambassadors, following his message, methods, and character (2 Cor. 5:14–21). Our calling allows us to represent the Lord of the universe to people around us! God is taking lost, confused, discouraged, rebellious, and self-absorbed people and making them into people who are empowered by his grace and motivated by his glory. Nothing is more important!

Truth #5. Being an instrument of change involves incarnating the love of Christ by sharing in people's struggles, identifying with their suffering, and extending God's grace as we call them to change. We should seek relationships that are more than mutually fulfilling. We are to build relationships in which God's work of personal transformation can thrive. We do this by sharing the love Christ has poured out on us. We do it by coming to those who suffer as fellow sufferers who offer God's comfort and compassion. And we do it by coming as sinners to other sinners, extending to them the grace that has transformed our hearts—and can do the same for theirs.

Truth #6. Being an instrument of change means seeking to know people by guarding against false assumptions, asking good questions, and interpreting information in a distinctly biblical way (Prov. 20:5; Heb. 4:14–16). We cannot be content with casual relationships among God's people. We want to really get to know people and discover where change is needed. We learn to ask questions that cannot be answered without self-disclosure. And we filter everything we learn about people through the grid of Scripture. Our goal is not only to know others biblically, but to help them know themselves in the same way.

Truth #7. Being an instrument of change means speaking the truth in love. With the gospel as our comfort and call, we can help people see themselves in God's Word and lead them to repentance (Rom. 8:1–17; Gal. 6:1–2; James 1:22–25). When we confront people with the truth, we want to be instruments of seeing and agents of repentance. It is easier for people to see problems in people and situations than it is to see them in themselves. That's why we lovingly hold the Word of God before them, so they can see themselves clearly and repent. Our prayer is that the words we speak will expose and change their hearts as they respond to the comfort and call of the gospel.

Truth #8. Being an instrument of change means helping people do what God calls them to do by clarifying responsibility, offering loving accountability, and reminding them of their identity in Christ (Phil. 2:1–14; 2 Peter 1:3–9; 1 John 3:1–3; Gal. 6:2). We must not confuse insight with heart and life change. Acquiring biblical insight is a necessary part of the process, but it is not, in itself, change. Change comes when people identify the specific things God is calling them to do and begin doing them by faith. We encourage this process by standing with people, offering the wisdom, guidance, and encouragement of biblical accountability. Lastly, we encourage change by helping people live out of an accurate sense of their identity as the children of God, with all the rights and privileges that this identity entails.

These are the biblical principles and perspectives that shape our ministry to others. The King has called us, and he will prepare us for his work. We have been bought with a price, and our lives do not belong to us. Receiving grace means becoming a conduit of grace to others. Suffering commissions us to comfort other sufferers. Being changed is to become an ambassador for change to others. There could be no more meaningful life this side of Glory! We should be deeply grateful to be included in the plan. But perhaps you wonder if you'll ever be able to live the lifestyle this book describes. Maybe you are dizzy with all the details, strategies, and skills. Perhaps you are overwhelmed by what you've seen about your own heart.

Two things always come to my mind as I finish teaching this material. First, I am hit with the utter simplicity of biblical personal ministry. It is not a secret technology for the intervention elite, but a simple call to every one of God's children to be part of what God is doing in the lives of others. It is living in humble, honest, redemptive community with others, *loving* as Christ has loved, and going beyond the casual to really *know* people. It is loving others enough to *speak* the truth to them, helping them to see themselves in the mirror of God's Word. And it is standing with others, helping them to *do* what God has called them to do. It is basically just a call to biblical friend-

ship! It is almost embarrassingly simple: *Love* people. *Know* them. *Speak* truth into their lives. Help them *do* what God has called them to do.

At the same time, there is a grandeur to personal ministry that cannot be captured with words. God is painting his grace on the canvas of human souls. One day we will stand with him in Glory and see that canvas completed, and we won't be able to do anything but worship. What is our part in all of this? We are God's brushes. He wants to soak us on the palette of his grace and paint more of his goodness on yet another soul. The question is, "Are we soft brushes in his hands?" A hard, dried-out brush doesn't pick up the paint well and mars the surface it was meant to beautify. I hope this book will help you become a soft brush in the hands of a Redeemer who will continue to paint until his canvas is complete.

As we stand before him on that last day and see the awesome beauty of the universe's most glorious canvas, God's voice will penetrate the sounds of our worship with these wonderful and mysterious words: "Well done, good and faithful servants!" Then we will know that each moment of ministry was worth it. We will know that we have been part of the most important, lasting, and beautiful thing that has ever been done—redemption. We will experience the reality of the words of the hymn:

Who are these like stars appearing,
 these before God's throne who stand?
 Each a golden crown is wearing;
 who are all this glorious band?
 Alleluia! Hark, they sing,
 praising loud their heav'nly King.

Who are these of dazzling brightness,
 these in God's own truth arrayed,
 clad in robes of purest whiteness,
 robes whose luster ne'er shall fade,
 ne'er be touched by time's rude hand?
 Whence come all this glorious band?

These are they who have contended
 for their Savior's honor long,
 wrestling on till life was ended,
 foll'wing not the sinful throng;
 these, who well the fight sustained,
 triumph through the Lamb have gained.

These are they whose hearts were riven,
 sore with woe and anguish tried,
 who in prayer full oft have striven
 with the God they glorified;
 now, their painful conflict o'er,
 God has bid them weep no more.

These, like priests, have watched and waited,
 off'ring up to Christ their will;
 soul and body consecrated,
 day and night to serve him still;
 now in God's most holy place
 blest they stand before his face.¹

These are the rewards awaiting God's faithful. May they encourage you in your service to the King!

APPENDIX 1: OPENING BLIND EYES: ANOTHER LOOK AT DATA GATHERING

Celia had come to counseling to “get help with relationships.” She called herself “rejection going somewhere to happen” and tearfully described her inability to find just one “faithful friend.” God seemed far off, yet Celia plaintively maintained that she was “not such a bad person,” surely not bad enough to deserve the “punches in the stomach” that she had received.

I sympathized with Celia but also endeavored to get her to look at herself. Since rejection was a theme in her life, I suggested that we ought to ask if there was anything she was doing to contribute to the problem. Celia immediately became defensive. As a counselor, what should I do next? I needed to know more about Celia, but more importantly, Celia needed to see more about herself. There were walls of personal blindness that needed to be penetrated or Celia would never be a true counselee. Celia was hurt, frustrated, and exhausted, but because of her personal blindness, she was not yet a seeker.

One of the tragic effects of the Fall is personal blindness of heart—it is universal. It is one of the things that makes biblical counseling so difficult. It radically alters the data-gathering process.

Because sin is deceitful and fallen people are so naturally blind to issues of self, data gathering must always pursue two goals. First, the process must give the counselor the information needed to provide wise biblical counseling. But an even more fundamental purpose is that we would be the Messiah's instruments to open eyes that have been blind for too long.

Opening blind eyes is at the heart of Christ's messianic mission. Looking forward to the coming Messiah, Isaiah says, “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped” (Isa. 35:5). God promises further, “I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before

them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them" (Isa. 42:16).

The Messiah is the One who is able to open the eyes of blind sinners and make them see. Isaiah describes the sinner this way:

So justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not reach us.
We look for light, but all is darkness;
for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.
Like the blind we grope along the wall,
feeling our way like men without eyes.
At midday we stumble as if it were twilight. . . . (Isa. 59:9–10a)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ commissions us to be part of his messianic mission to shine the light of truth into the darkness of sin. This is exactly what we should be seeking to do in counseling. Our goal is not only to expose the darkness that exists in relationships and situations but the darkness of the heart, so that the gospel can be applied.

All counselees in some way "groped along . . . feeling [their] way like men without eyes." Our data gathering needs to take this need seriously. I want to help counselees see themselves in the mirror of God's Word. I will ask questions that they would never ask and probe in places they would not know to probe. My questions will flow out of biblical perspectives on people and their problems. Here I image the Messiah as I seek to end the groping in darkness. I am not simply announcing my conclusions but helping blind eyes to see, with biblical clarity and depth, the heart's thoughts and motives.

This appendix focuses on the "eye-opening" function of data gathering. We will examine the nature of the blindness that all sinners experience and look at what we must bring to our role as God's instruments.

THE MASKS OF SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

The difference between physical and spiritual blindness is that the former is blatantly obvious while the latter often goes unnoticed. A physically blind person is immediately confronted with his condition. Often, a spiritually blind person not only fails to recognize his blindness, he is convinced

that he has excellent vision. A fundamental part of being spiritually blind is that you are blind to your blindness.

Spiritual blindness is the condition of every sinner, every counselee. Yet few will realize its impact on the way they view themselves, God, others, and their situations. They are like those described in Romans 1, who think that they are wise when really they are fools. They assume that they think well when the thinking of their heart is actually foolish and futile.

Spiritual blindness is deceptive. As John wrote to the church in Laodicea, "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, *blind* and naked" (Rev. 3:17). Spiritual blindness is deceptive because it masquerades as other things. If we are going to be God's instruments to open blind eyes, we must recognize the typical masks that spiritual blindness wears. The following is a representative list.

THE MASK OF AN ACCURATE SENSE OF SELF

Celia thought she knew herself. She was offended at the suggestion that she might bear some responsibility for what was happening in her life. It is only as one looks intently into the perfect mirror of Scripture that a person will see himself as he actually is (James 1:22–25).

Most of our counselees will have distorted views of themselves because the mirrors into which they look are like carnival mirrors. They reflect the real you but with a distortion. You see yourself, but not as you really are.

So it is with many counselees. Their sense of self has been developed by looking into the carnival mirror of others' opinions, or a cultural view of success, or pop psychology, or past experience (the list could go on). The counselee is unaware that he has a distorted sense of self. He has the Word of God, but he has used it more as an encyclopedia of religious thought or a devotional tool. Even when listening to the Word preached, he will miss the revelation of self that is there. He hears stories or principles expounded but does not see himself mirrored in the passages.

THE MASK OF BEING SINNED AGAINST

Celia was able to recount—in Technicolor detail—stories of constant abuse at the hands of others. Her focus was on how others behaved toward her.

There is no more powerful metaphor to describe how spiritual blindness masquerades as a sense of being sinned against than the “plank and speck” metaphor of Matthew 7. Imagine a person literally obsessed with a piece of dust in another’s eye while walking around with a plank jutting out of his own! He is gripped by a sense of being sinned against, not of being a sinner. Thus, to him, the change that is needed is change outside himself.

THE MASK OF TRIALS AND TESTING

Celia did not have an accurate sense of herself and her sin, so she tended to call the natural consequences of her own choices and actions *trials*. Paul says, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:7–8).

Since most of our counselees do not have a harvest mentality, they tend to look at the things they harvest not as the result of their planting, but as painful trials they do not deserve.

Also, because sinners tend to exchange worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of the created thing (see Rom. 1:25), they tend to miss the good things that the Creator is doing in a situation. Instead, they focus on the loss of some created thing. A trial is a trial to me because it puts what is valuable to me at stake. Manna falling from heaven became a trial to the Israelites because they were not focusing on the covenant love its provision represented, but on its taste as compared to the menu of Egypt!

Counselees in their blindness will call the consequences of their own behavior “trials” and the good things from God’s hand “testings.” They will be blind to the fact that God sends trials for their redemptive good. Rather than seeing themselves as loved by God and being conformed to the image of his Son through circumstances, they see themselves as singled out for difficulty. To them, life isn’t fair. Suffering is without redemptive purpose and a sign that God does not love them.

THE MASK OF NEEDS

Celia saw herself as needy. She viewed herself as one who had spent most of her life living without. She often said, “If only I had had _____,

then I would have been able to _____.” Her understanding of needs was as cloudy as the culture’s around her. Yet her interpretation of her life rested heavily on this term. Essentially she was saying that her life’s problems were the direct result of her neediness. She carried with her the classic, “If only . . .” interpretation of life.

What Celia didn’t see was that her neediness was really more about sin’s tragic effect, which turns us from worshipers of God to those who live “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (Eph. 2:3). Her neediness revealed much more about who she was than what she was missing. Celia’s sense of need revealed the lusts of her heart more than it revealed the betrayal of others. And what she *actually* needed was the one thing she never craved—God. If you really want to understand what is important to a person, find out where he feels needy. Values become desires, desires become demands, and demands get expressed in counseling as “needs.”

Celia was blind to the fact that she was the sun in the center of her universe and that all of life was viewed from the vantage point of what it offered her. She was blind to the fact that she carried this “needs” perspective into every room she entered, and it shaped every situation and relationship. She came into situations loaded with silent demands and responded with angry criticism to anyone who seemed to ignore her needs. She thought that her neediness proved the selfishness and unwillingness of all around her when, in fact, it demonstrated the depth of her own self-centeredness.

THE MASK OF WISE COUNSEL

Like all counselees, Celia had many voices around her. Like Job, much of the counsel she received was not helpful; and it was not helpful because it was not biblical. Yet Celia found comfort in the words of her counselors, if only for a season.

Although she was coming for counseling, Celia often repeated to me the “wisdom” she had gleaned from those around her. But Celia only quoted people who agreed with her view of life and supported the decisions she made. She did not quote anyone who disagreed with her.

Another scriptural term for the spiritually blind is “fools.” Celia’s wise counsel was really foolishness. It only appeared wise to her because she was blind to the real issues in her life. Proverbs says that the fool has “no desire

to get wisdom" (Prov. 17:16). Celia thought she was on a quest for wise counsel when really she was on a quest for support of her point of view.

THE MASK OF PERSONAL INSIGHT

Celia, like all human beings, was always seeking to make sense out of her life. She wanted it organized into categories that would help her understand what had gone on and what she should do about it. She spent much of her time analyzing things and felt it had been helpful. But her search was not open-ended: if I began to question Celia's interpretations, there would soon be an air of tension in the room.

Spiritual blindness can even masquerade as wisdom! To be intellectually bright and actively analytical does not necessarily mean that you are wise. True wisdom begins with humility, the recognition that I do not have in myself all that I need. I need to be a seeker after the truth that is found only in God's Word. Real insight does not result from being analytical but from being biblical. Listen to the words of the psalmist:

Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,
for they are ever with me.
I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes.
I have more understanding than the elders,
for I obey your precepts.

(Ps. 119:98–100)

Celia was blind to the fact that her insight revealed more about her heart than her situation. Her insight was born out of desires that distorted her interpretations of what was going on around her. It was more a desire-driven perspective than an objective analysis. Thus, it was more an expression of idolatry than an expression of faith. Yet none of this was obvious to Celia because blindness often wears the mask of insight.

THE MASK OF A SENSE OF VALUES

Celia thought she knew what was important, but the more I listened to her, the more I was convinced that what moved her were not the things of

prime importance. Here again Celia was blind. She had evaluated her situation and acted in a way consistent with her values, yet her problems continued. This left her frustrated and confused.

The treasures that motivated Celia all had to do with human relationships. She saw friendship, respect, acceptance, and love as most important and did all she could to avoid rejection, loneliness, and the low self-image she said resulted. But the more Celia examined people and their reactions, the more she tried to please them and the angrier she got. She entered her relationships with a long list of silent demands, yet she was unaware of how judgmental and unforgiving she was when people failed to live up to them. Matthew 6 says that whatever is my treasure will control my heart, and what controls my heart will control my behavior. In other words, I will live to gain, maintain, and enjoy the things of value to me.

Celia's problem was her values. She had put her identity in the hands of people. She kept meeting frustration and failure because the God who had called her to himself was working on something different. His focus was not so much on the relationships but on Celia, that she would be conformed to his Son's image.

Counselors often do not recognize their blindness because it is masked by a passionate sense of right and wrong. The angry man who has hurt his family for years with his violent responses sees only what he has lost by being separated from them. To him what is important is his right to see his kids and to live in the home he pays for. He keeps saying in counseling, "This is not right, it just isn't right!" Yet he is blind to the changes he needs to make in order for the family to be properly restored.

A wife's focus is on the coldness and distance of her husband. She wants the counselor to turn him into a man who cherishes her, yet she is blind to the constant stream of criticism that has driven him away. She is irate when the counselor begins to focus on her as someone who needs change. She is utterly blind to the eternally valuable things God wants to work in her.

THE MASK OF THEOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Celia knew a lot about Scripture and the doctrines of the faith. There were few biblical-theological terms that I could use with which she was not familiar.

Unfortunately, Celia's theological knowledge did four things for her.

First, it produced a level of confidence in her interpretations of life. She assumed that her ideas and actions flowed out of her beliefs. Second, it produced in her an assessment of maturity. Celia thought of herself as a mature believer and was offended if someone treated her as someone needing basic biblical teaching. Third, in counseling her knowledge gave Celia an “I already knew that and I already tried that” attitude. Fourth, it produced in her a sense that her problems were not her fault. She “knew what was right and did what was best.” Hence, the cause of the difficulty had to be outside of her. Her knowledge obscured personal responsibility and conviction of sin.

The fact was that Celia had not been able to apply her theology to everyday life in a way that made sense of her struggles. She was a lady without wisdom, blind to the fact that she was not spiritually mature. Spiritual maturity results from practicing truth in everyday life, not from knowing truth in one’s mind (Heb. 5:11–14). But Celia was convinced that her Christian counselors kept telling her things she already knew.

Coupled with this sense of theological adequacy was Celia’s tendency to ask the wrong questions. Celia’s questions did not lead her to a deeper understanding of her situation, a fuller hope in God, or a practical agenda for change. There is a principle here that we will consider more fully in a future article. It is this: insightful people are insightful not because they have the right answers but because they have asked the right questions. If you do not ask the right questions, you will never get to the right answers. Celia constantly found herself in an analytical cul-de-sac, leading to a loss of hope and a struggle with depression.

Here is an example of Celia’s wrong questions. She would say, “I pray and I pray. I read my Bible. Yet God isn’t helping me. He isn’t answering my prayers.” Then she would ask this question: “Why isn’t God working in my life?” This is a bad question, based on an unbiblical assumption, which cannot lead in a good direction.

Celia’s question led her to two answers. Sometimes she would conclude that God wasn’t active because he simply didn’t love her. He had better things to do than worry about her puny life. On other occasions she would conclude that God was not active in her life because she was such a miserable sinner, and his inactivity was a punishment for her iniquity. Bad answers to a bad question will produce a harvest of bad fruit. Like Job’s infamous counselors, Celia did not build the bridges from her theology to her situation that would lead to biblical interpretations of life.

To ask Celia’s question biblically, one must start with the following bib-

lical assumption: God is ever active in my life (Ps. 46; Rom. 8:18–39). To ask why he isn’t working is to assume something that is untrue. True conclusions cannot come from false assumptions. A better way of asking the question is to say, “God is redemptively active in my life, so what is he doing and why don’t I recognize it?” This question can lead to greater insight, biblical change, and a harvest of good fruit.

THE MASK OF PERSONAL HOLINESS

Although Celia did not speak of herself using the biblical language of holiness, that is precisely what she thought she possessed. She believed that she wanted the right things and that she did the right things; she could not figure out why things were so wrong. Her belief in her personal holiness rested on a legalistic self-righteousness that had nothing to do with God’s call to “Be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:44).

Celia was blind to the fact that she was a classic Pharisee. Like a Pharisee, she reduced God’s law to a doable human standard. The things Celia emphasized required no reliance on Christ—they were behavioral standards that made no demands on the heart. Celia saw the gospel as having to do with Heaven and Hell. She felt no need for the present redemptive power of Christ in her life because the “righteousness” she had attained was humanly attainable.

Celia consistently emphasized lesser things and prided herself in accomplishing them, yet she ignored the weightier matters of the law. She prided herself in her neat home, in her punctuality, in her memory of every friend’s birthday, the Christian books she had read, her financial vigilance, and her willingness to volunteer. Yet she was jealous, angry, judgmental, bitter, vengeful, and lacking in mercy.

Christ said to his disciples, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). To the Pharisees he said, “You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former” (Matt. 23:23). The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was not enough *because it was not righteousness*. It was ugly, prideful, human *self-righteousness*. This kind of righteousness always emphasizes what is humanly doable and ignores what can only be accomplished through the bountiful streams of the grace of Christ.

Perhaps this is the epicenter of spiritual blindness. At its core, to be spiritually blind means to think you are righteous when really you are not. This makes the grace of God and the obligation to change non-issues. If I am righteous (so I think), I do not need Christ and I do not need change. This is clearly demonstrated in Luke 18 with the story of the two men in the temple. The Pharisee stood in the temple and told God that he did not need him. He was there to announce that he was okay, distancing himself from the sinner and listing his righteous acts before the Lord.

Similarly, Celia would come to counseling and recite her list of good deeds, asking me to agree that she was okay. By missing the important issues of the heart and emphasizing doable behaviors, she saw herself as being clean, yet inside were “dead men’s bones.”

THE MASK OF REPENTANCE

Celia, like many counselees, thought that being in counseling was an act of repentance. This is not always true. Many of those we counsel tend to see the talking they do as confession and their staying in the counseling process as repentance. But for Celia counseling was really more like penance. She was blind to the fact that she was really participating in an act of self-atonement. I call this “Protestant absolution.” The counselee confesses, examines issues, participates in an ongoing discussion of self and the situation and, week by week, leaves the counseling time feeling atoned, cleansed, and right. Yet all of this is happening without any substantive heart or behavioral change. The counselees see themselves as repentant, but in reality there are times when counseling becomes a way to *avoid* working on the issues on God’s agenda.

Celia’s life did not bear the fruit of repentance. First, she was not becoming a self-starter. She continued in sinful and destructive behaviors though we talked about them on numerous occasions. She would grudgingly admit wrong when confronted, but her confessions seldom resulted in new ways of responding. Second, Celia remained defensive. She continued to have a hard time receiving my biblical evaluation of her. She accused me of not understanding her, of not believing her, or of taking another’s side. Third, Celia did not have a teachable spirit. It was hard for her to admit her need to be instructed from Scripture and to learn to apply it to her life. She would debate my theology, my interpretation of a passage, or my application

of a biblical principle to her life. Fourth, Celia completed her counseling homework in a perfunctory manner, without enthusiasm, insight, or the changes that were the goal of the assignment.

Yet Celia saw very little of that. She was blinded by her legalistic attendance at counseling, her willingness to discuss personal issues, and her study of assigned Scripture passages. Unfortunately, all of these things (which she thought indicated repentance) masked the bitterness and self-righteousness that controlled Celia’s heart.

Repentance is presented in Scripture as a radical change of heart that results in a radically different way of living. As the heart turns and moves in a different direction, the life does as well. Anything short of this is simply not repentance. Many people come to counseling with the goal of self-atonement, though they may not realize it. They want support for what they are doing. They want to feel good about themselves, and they find that they do feel better after their counseling sessions, so they continue. But they have not submitted to God’s radical call to repentance. They are not praying with the psalmist in Psalm 139:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.
(Ps. 139:23–24)

Being “in counseling” kept Celia blind to her stubborn, unrepentant heart. She thought of herself as one who had confessed everything she needed to confess. She saw herself as repentant. “Why else would I be in counseling?” she would say. Shocking as it may seem, spiritual blindness even wears the mask of repentance!

It is vital to remember the profound effect that spiritual blindness has on every sinner and his view of life. Our data gathering needs to be motivated by the counselee’s need to see. Further, we need to remember that spiritually blind people do not think they are blind because their blindness wears many masks. We need to recognize these masks and pursue a data gathering process that opens the counselee’s eyes to who he really is. We commit ourselves to be God’s means of opening blind eyes and to see this as a necessary data-gathering function.