

God's Glory is the Goal of Biblical Counseling



BY JOHN PIPER

In a series at our church on eschatology, I was preaching on Jesus' second coming from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Paul begins and ends in a way that helped me take my people and say, "This is what you do with eschatology." Paul begins like this: "We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those who have fallen asleep, that you might not grieve as those who have no hope." Then he closes, "Now, comfort one another with these words." He begins and ends on this *pastoral* note. Eschatology's about how you suffer and how you help.

I stopped speaking, and we took some time for discussion. People only wanted to know whether the time frame was pre-mil, post-mil, or a-mil. I said, "You're missing the point. Do you hear this? Paul doesn't want them to be ignorant of the fact that Jesus is alive. Jesus will come back. We will be with Him forever. Why? So they'll *grieve* a certain way. So they'll *comfort* each other a certain way. Do you get this? Do you see what knowledge is about? It's about how to grieve. It's about how to counsel grieving friends. You speak knowledge into people's lives, and it shakes their grief. Do you see this? This is what your mouth is for, people: 'The

mouth of the wise is a fountain of life.' Knowledge is so others can drink life-giving words. Doctrine is all about feeling, all about how you live, all about how you counsel."

Let me give my definition of biblical counseling right off the bat: "Biblical counseling is God-centered, Bible-saturated, emotionally-in-touch use of language to help people become God-besotted, Christ-exalting, joyfully self-forgetting lovers of people." I'd like to unpack that definition for you in what follows, and ask, What is the relationship between delight and doctrine? What is the relationship between counseling and the church? and What is the relationship between God's glory and His love for us?

BIBLICAL COUNSELING IS...

God-centered, Bible-saturated, emotionally-in-touch use of language to help people become God-besotted, Christ-exalting, joyfully self-forgetting lovers of people. What does that mean?

First, it means *teaching truth*. That 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 passage bursts with truth:

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede

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those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Biblical counseling is nothing if it is not God-centered and Bible-saturated. R. C. Sproul said to me not long after James Boice died that in one of his last conversations with him, Dr. Boice said, "R. C., we are surrounded by pastoral wimps who say, People don't need teaching, they don't need knowledge: they need to be hugged, they need silence, they need stories, they need experiences shared." James Boice is absolutely right about the shrinking emphasis on teaching. People desperately need to be taught about the nature of God. They desperately need a biblical, God-centered perspective on everything. *Before* a calamity like September 11, you lay the foundations for your people of the granite sovereignty and glory of God so that they don't say, "Nonsense!" or don't shut their mouths with nothing to say. That's what Christian counseling is about—whether it is from the pulpit, in the office, or over the fence in the backyard. My take on the nature of counseling is that it has to do with knowledge, it has to do with your mouth, it has to do with doctrine, it has to do with the nature of God—communicated in ways that change hearers.

I get that from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, and, of course, it is all over the Bible. Consider Romans 15:4: "Whatever was written beforehand was written for your instruction in order that by the steadfastness and encouragement of the Scriptures *you might have hope*." Everything written is hope-giving. It all moves from written knowledge to heart-fearing. Or Psalm 19:7-8, "The law of the Lord is perfect, *reviving* the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, *making wise* the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, *rejoicing* the heart." Teaching makes alive. Witness makes wise. Precepts produce joy. If they don't, something is wrong! You are doing something wrong! Precepts produce change in emotions. Preaching goes to the emotions with doctrine. John 15:11 says:

"These things I have spoken to you *that your joy might be full*." Speaking is about joy. Preaching is about joy. Counseling is about joy. You go from the head to the mouth to the head to the heart and produce joy, which transforms life.

Let me shift to my second concern, getting counseling into the church. Where else would it be, for goodness' sake? Can it be anywhere else and be true?

There are hindrances here. Let me point out and address just one. (I will say much more about the church later.) A lot of people listening to what I have said might respond, "It doesn't work," or "I've never seen anybody given to doctrine who is emotionally in touch!" There's one of the biggest obstacles! Here's my recommendation. Almost everything I do with my life is intended to solve this problem. If counseling, as I have laid it out, is to be restored to the church, affection must be restored to reflection. If counseling is to be restored to the church, delight in God must be restored to doctrines about God. Savoring Christ must be restored to seeing Christ. Tender contrition must be restored to tough conviction. Communion with God must be restored to contending for God. I got that last one from John Owen. He said, "We have communion with God in the doctrines we contend for."¹ That is his measure of whether he is contending truly. "I must learn to commune with God in the doctrine." Isn't that an interesting phrase? Who talks like that today? You have to go back three hundred years to find things so powerful on sin and communion with God. "Contending for and communing with God in a doctrine." Where is there a systematic theology class that helps students realize that when you unpack the incarnation or the nature of the Trinity or the two natures of Christ or the substitutionary atonement, you commune with the Lord as you defend and contend for the doctrine, or else you are not doing it right? No wonder people often don't want to be around doctrinally-driven people! They aren't doing doctrine right. They aren't emotionally in touch with the truths they teach.

¹John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Gould (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965 [orig., 1850-1853]), Vol. I, pp. lxiii-lxiv.

We have a huge problem with this in the Reformed community. Reformed people are so afraid of emotion that they think I am talking about subjectivism. Pastors, you have a big job here, an impossible job. But you have to do this. Let me read to you your mandate with regard to modeling for your people what is hindering the arrival of their being effective counselors to each other. I am much more concerned about my people counseling each other than I am about my doing counseling myself. I counsel mainly from the pulpit in order to create counselors, a couple thousand of them. Here is what it says in Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account. Let them [the leaders, elders, pastors] do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." This is an amazing mandate for pastors. Basically, it is saying that if you want to love your people and to be an advantage rather than

way that indicates he's kind of afraid that it *will* make him happy. Why would you want to come back to listen? We all want to be happy! That is exactly the way God made us. The desire to be happy is the same as the desire of being hungry. It is a God-given thing, written right on our hearts. God put Himself as the all-satisfying center of all joy. The reason you are not happy, if you are not, is because you have not gotten to the center yet. Joyful leaders, who commune with the truths they contend for, are crucial to restoring counseling to the church. That's my second observation.

Third, how does this relate to *the glory of God*? This restoring delight to doctrine, affection to reflection, savoring to seeing, communion to contending: how does that relate to the glory of God? Let me say a word about Hebrews and the way it is structured and then read something from Jonathan Edwards. The whole book of Hebrews moves toward big issues like "hold fast to your confidence, be

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a hindrance to them, you need to be happy. Is that a bad paraphrase? I'd go to the mat with any scholar over that paraphrase! It says, "Let them do this pastoral work—watching over your souls—with joy, not with groaning, because that would be of no advantage to you." Pastors, if you want to love and bless people, pursue your joy! If you become indifferent to the pursuit of your own joy, you become indifferent to love, and you can't equip the church to counsel. That is sin! You cannot love people if you are indifferent to your happiness in the Lord.

Now there are hosts of Reformed and other types who sin when they preach and talk about doctrine, by denying in their whole demeanor the preciousness of what they are talking about. The people do not come away saying, "That was the sweetest thing I have ever heard." The pastor doesn't look like he thinks it is sweet or precious. He doesn't look like he thinks it is life-changing or that it would make him happy. In fact, he seems to be talking in a

strong in your encouragement, be joyful in your assurance, be deep in your contentment" (Heb. 3:6, 6:18, 10:34, 13:5.) These words—confidence, encouragement, assurance, contentment—are all emotion-laden. The book of Hebrews is all about your joy, persevering in it, and being radically ready to lay down your life to take the gospel where it hasn't gone. Why? Because it is all about Christ. Everything in it is about the superiority of Christ's priesthood, sacrifice, covenant, and mediatorial work. That glorious, grand, Christ-exalting foundation in Hebrews aims to produce confidence and joy and assurance and contentment and the radical lifestyle that flows from it. That means that if you preach in a way that people begin to delight in this Christ, He gets all of the glory. The book is structured so that the magnificence of Christ's superiority supports confidence, encouragement, and contentment. The pervasive presence of such positive, satisfying emotions in your church magnifies the foundation for them, Jesus Christ.

Jonathan Edwards said it this way: "So, God glorifies Himself also toward the creatures in two ways: 1. By appearing to...their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of Himself...*God is glorified, not only by His glory's being seen [known, reflected upon], but by its being rejoiced in...* God made the world that He might communicate, and the creature receive, His glory and that it might [be] received both by the mind and the heart. He that testifies his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it."² You see and understand Christ: doctrine. You trust and love Christ: joy.

When asked "Why did God create a world in which there would be continuous rebellion?" even some Reformed leaders answer by saying, "We don't know." We *do* know! It is for His glory! It's as plain as day in Isaiah 43:7: "Bring my daughters and my sons from afar, everyone whom I have created for my glory." This world, as He knew it, was created for His glory. Of course there are all kinds of complexities and mysteries in that. But you don't need to start with ignorance. You can start with knowledge. Then you can move to ignorance, of which, of course, there is much in our minds because we are finite. There are all kinds of questions to ask about knowledge that we can't answer. But you don't need to start with empty-headedness! It's a cowering in fear.

On the one hand, you have the Reformed, who testify to their ideas about God by crossing every "t," dotting every "i," and getting the doctrines right, to which I say, "Absolutely, Amen! I am with you." On the other hand, you have the Charismatics, who are loopy-goopy about their doctrine. They are all emotion—get those hands up and clapping, and those feet stomping, and feel something, for goodness' sake, or God hasn't arrived! I'm also with them! I hate the cleavage between these two. I am

going to do everything within my power while I breathe to help each of these folks see that, according to Edwards, they are giving God only half His glory. Know Him truly and don't feel Him duly—He gets half His glory. Feel Him duly and don't know Him truly—He gets half His glory. Let's give Him all of His glory, like Jonathan Edwards.

That means, pastors, depending upon which of those camps you are in, we must join Paul in his apostolic goal. Let me quote him for you: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we are workers with you for your joy" (2 Cor 1:21). The apostolic goal: work with the church for its joy! Do you do that? Is that your mandate? Do you get up in the morning, dreaming about how to work with the church for its joy? Maybe you think that was an isolated slip of Paul's pen, and that he meant to write "faith" there. That's what it sort of sounds like. "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we are workers together with you for your faith." But he said "joy" instead of "faith."

Let's go to another text to confirm this. In Philippians 1, Paul is not sure whether he is going to live or die. He wants to die to go to be with Jesus, yet he knows he should stay. Why? "But I am persuaded I will remain and stay with you all *for your advancement and joy of faith*" (Phil. 1:25). Isn't that amazing? The great writer of the doctrinally unsurpassed book of Romans says his whole life on planet earth is devoted to the joy of the saints. So, pastors, you better not think you have a more noble goal.

Let me summarize where we've come. We talked about the nature of counseling, and how Word and knowledge have an impact on heart and feeling. Second, we talked a little about restoring counseling to the church by restoring affection to reflection. Third, I tried to relate that to the glory of God by arguing that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. Therefore, pastors, if you want God to be most glorified in your people, you must satisfy them with God. The agenda that notion sets for how you preach is wondrous. How will you be faithful to the Scripture and get God right? The heart-work can be done only by the Holy Spirit. Joy is His fruit. This goal makes you a desperate pastor because you cannot make people happy in God by yourself. Yes, you can

²Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies,"* ed. by Thomas Schafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 495. Miscellany #448; see also #87, pp. 251-252; #332, p. 410; #679 (not in the New Haven Volume). Emphasis added.

make them happy in church by telling stories, by making them laugh, so they're glad they came to your church. You can even grow a church without God and without the Holy Spirit. What you cannot do, though, is make people happy in God without God. The human soul is wired to be happy in everything else but God since the fall. If your goal is to be a worker with and for their joy in God, you are desperately inadequate. This is why we are called to the Word and prayer. He performs; ask Him. We are desperate for His help.

Fourth, I want to speak concerning what it is to love and be loved. What is it for God to love and for us to be loved by Him? What is it for us to love God and love other people? This is right at the heart of biblical counseling, isn't it? A sense of being loved, helping people to become loving people, and understanding how God loves us—sinners that we are.

For many years I have been trying to figure out how God's pursuit of His glory relates to His love for you and me. What I find gets clearer every year, and in recent months has gotten even clearer. For example, a woman came up to me after church, weeping her eyes out in distress over the problems in her life. At one point in our conversation I asked her, "If you were in a place where you had your family, perfect health, all your favorite foods, and all your favorite recreation, and you didn't have to feel guilty, would you still want to be there if Jesus wasn't there?" She cried out, "Yes!" That is where a lot of professing Christians are. The gifts of Christ are what they feel good about, not Christ. Forgiveness feels good, getting rid of guilt feels good, staying out of hell feels good, having a marriage work feels good, having the kids stay off drugs feels good, and having the body made well feels good. Frankly, Jesus can take a vacation. Just give me these things.

But, I don't think there will be anyone in heaven who doesn't want to be around Jesus more than they want anything else. This is why I am serious about joy. If you do not have joy in Jesus, you won't go to heaven.

So, what does it mean to be loved by God? God's love is almost impossible for Americans to grasp after fifty years of being saturated with love interpreted as enhancing self-esteem. For most Americans, to be loved is to feel made

much of. That's the very definition of love. If you do things and say things that make much of me, I feel loved by you. If you don't, I don't. That means the love of God is inconceivable and unfeeling by those people. God is not into making much of us. To the degree that we distort the cross into an affirmation of my diamond-in-the-rough value, we lose the love of God. The cross is all about vindicating the righteousness and the glory of God, who has been pleased to enable unworthy sinners to delight in God.

Why would He treat us so kindly when we are sinners, forgiving all our sins so that we might enjoy making much of Him? I ask this question everywhere I go now, to see if people are American or Christian. I ask, "Do you feel more loved when God makes much of you or do you feel more loved when God, at the cost of His Son, enables you to enjoy making much of Him forever?" These are two profoundly different root sources of satisfaction. One is being made much of; the other is seeing and savoring God and making much of God. Where is the bottom of your satisfaction? Everything in our culture teaches you to make being made much of the bottom of your satisfaction, which is what the devil wants you to do. This has been the case for all of us ever since the fall. That we might instead be so deeply and inwardly transformed that there might be a new root source to our joy is inconceivable to the natural man! This is why the cross is folly, God is folly, and the church is folly to the natural man. The spiritual man is fundamentally a person whose deepest root source of joy has been altered from self to God.

Let me read a text to you from John 11. "Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. So the sisters sent word to Him saying, 'Lord, behold, he *whom you love* is sick.'" Don't miss that word, love. Jesus loves Lazarus. Lazarus is sick. What does love mean? "But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'This sickness is not to end in death but for the *glory of God*.'" There are two massive biblical realities here: love of people and the glory of God. The driving question in my life for the last

twenty years has been, "How do they relate?" The passage goes on, "This sickness is not going to end in death but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it. Now Jesus *loved* Martha and her sister and Lazarus."

This is not a loveless thing going on here. This is love. This is a portrait of love, and a portrait of how God the Son will be glorified. Then comes the absolutely, unintelligible conjunction from the standpoint of the world: "Therefore, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was." The "therefore" carries a megaton of theology! Jesus loves Lazarus. Lazarus is sick and he is going to die. It's a hard thing to die, Jesus, for someone to drown in his own pneumonia, or for his liver to be eaten away or his kidneys or stomach with such horrific pain, and no morphine in those days. I don't know how Lazarus died, but he was dying, and it was slow. Are You just going to let him die? Why do You not love him? But Jesus says, "I love him. I love you, Martha, and I love you, Mary. I'm not going to fix this problem." Why? In order that the Son of God may be glorified.

How would you define love on the basis of this text? Here's my definition. Love is doing whatever you have to do at whatever cost to yourself in order to help another person stop

were made for something great outside themselves that draws the soul out into the most healthy, glorious, self-forgetting experience of delight—call it worship—that the world can scarcely imagine. Love does what is needed to help others love God's glory in Christ. Counseling is one of the most crucial forms of love. Counseling does what is needed to help others love God's glory in Christ.

ACCORDING TO HEBREWS, PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS IS A COMMUNITY PROJECT, THEREFORE...

We need biblical counseling as the lifeblood of church life. We share in Christ only if we hold our original confidence firm to the end. This is a life-and-death matter. You can hear the urgency in Hebrews 3:12-13: "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin," that you won't have "an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." Perseverance of the saints is a community project. Being together in smaller settings, exhorting one another day in and day out over the phone, in person, face-to-face, in notes, in e-mails. This is not icing on the cake! We won't survive and go to heaven without it.

This involves a striking two-sided

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finding pleasure in being made much of and help them get to the mature, God-exalting, Christ-besotted, joyfully self-sacrificing, self-forgetting delight in making much of God for the sake of others. Jesus was going to do what Lazarus, Mary, and Martha needed to be able to glorify Him. How can we help our people break free from the love affair of being made much of? How can we all forget this little thing called the ego, and be ravished by what we were made for—God? Nobody takes a trip to stand on the edge of the Grand Canyon in order to enhance his or her self-esteem. The reason people go to the Grand Canyon is that a whisper of common grace remaining in their lives tells them they

dynamic in those of us (all of us) who need such counseling every day. Hebrews 10:23 puts it this way: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." God holds on to you, therefore you hold on to God. Paul expressed the same dynamic in Philippians 3:12: "I press on in order that I may lay hold on that [Christ, resurrection, glory] for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." Hold on to the one who holds on to you. So many people pull these two apart. If you are a preacher of "lay hold on," you don't sound like you believe in the perseverance of the saints. If you are a preacher of "He laid hold on you," it doesn't seem like

you have urgency about what we must do. The Bible won't let us choose between the two. God will keep His hand on your hand and won't let you let go of Him. Hold on, and don't let go.

This perseverance in faith *happens* in community, as Hebrews 10:24-25 goes on to teach us. Now here's a great text for counseling in the church, if there ever was one! "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works." Unfortunately, not a single translation gets this text right from the Greek. In the Greek, the direct object of the verb "consider" is "one another." A literal translation would read, "Let us consider one another, unto the stirring up to love and good works." That's plain awkward, so all the translations say, "Let us consider how to stir one another up." But the focus of the considering is *you*! In a counseling session, or as a friend, or as a preacher looking out on the congregation, look at those people. Consider them, think about them, know them, figure them out, get into their lives. How can you stir them up to love? How will you provoke them to do lots of good works, to get healthy and start to care about others? You have to *consider* people. That's verse 24.

The passage continues: "...not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some." I grew up in a church where that verse was used to beat people over the head to get them to come to church on Sunday mornings. But that's not what the text is about! The next phrase says, "But encourage one another." *That's* why you get together: to counsel each other. It does not happen, by and large, on Sunday morning. By design, in my church, *I'm* preaching on Sunday morning. These folks who come *may* talk to each other before or after the service. I hope they are incredibly friendly and have great conversations, but that's not the main event on Sunday morning. The main event Sunday morning is us going *together* to God in song, in prayer, in Scripture, and the Lord's table. We do it through the Word and the power of the Spirit and get as vertical as we can because that is an important piece of the church. Later, you get out of there and do church with each other elsewhere: in living rooms and car pools and on the phone. "Don't forsake our meeting together so that you may encourage one another": that's biblical counseling. "And all the more as you

see the Day drawing near." One of the responses to apocalyptic times is to have more small groups, more getting together to consider each other and help each other hold fast to Christ and to love well. That's exactly what this verse says. There will be terrors, fearful things, before the Day of the Lord. When those happen or loom on the horizon, more togetherness, more encouragement, more mutual lay counseling needs to occur. Open your mouths and become fountains of life to each other, even sages.

I love to speak to the women at my church on this topic. I happen to be one of those conservative, old-fashioned, stuck-in-the-mud people who think the Bible teaches that women should not be pastors. Now, my church is full of young, bright, articulate, and competent women who are all smarter than their husbands. They know the Bible better. So, here I am with this quirky, biblical view. They are okay with that. One of the reasons they are okay with that is that I try to keep holding up visions for what mature, articulate, intelligent, creative womanhood can be. One of my models is the sage. If you women (and men, too) are looking for a model of what to grow into as you get into your forties, fifties, and sixties, and wrinkles become beautiful and gray hair becomes a crown, and the shape isn't what it used to be, then consider the sage.

The sage has grown wise doctrinally, read good, substantial solid books, meditated on her Bible, taken courses, and possibly learned Greek and Hebrew, whatever it takes to go deep with God like that old washerwoman who taught Charles Spurgeon all his Calvinism. The sage has also gone deep through suffering (every woman suffers), and has taken it, embraced it, and learned from it, without becoming a where-are-you-God? self-absorbed kind of woman. Instead, she sees that God has a great, solid, deep, loving purpose in her life in all her pain. She comes through those things as a sage. She may not preach in public, but she is someone to whom younger women stream for help, wisdom, and insight in how to live life and know God. There are young women by the thousands who want women like that and cannot find them!

We have been doing this feminist thing for thirty or forty years. I have ideas about why

it isn't working, but I just want to say, make it your aim, instead, to become a sage. Know how to encourage. Have something helpful to say by the grace and the anointing of the Spirit. Make available a head filled with biblical truth and a heart filled with learned, person-oriented experience. A sage has walked through hard times with God, has gone deep with God, and, therefore, is wise about how to live, how to handle a husband who is just maddening to a wife because he doesn't touch her the way he ought, he doesn't talk to her the way he ought, he seems distracted and distant, and she feels so alone, empty, and barren that she wishes she had married the right guy. She needs a lot of help. She needs to be told something like, "At age thirty-five, be encouraged that at age seventy-five, when you have been married to this man for fifty years, you will look into each other's eyes with the deepest sense of satisfaction and say, 'We made it!'"

Hebrews 3 and 10 lay the groundwork for counseling in the church. I will draw out five points to guide us in our counseling.

Perseverance, like joy, is essential.

You are lost if you don't persevere, which makes a pastor very serious if he believes this. People say, "Do you ever preach salvation messages on Sunday morning?" I say, "That's all I preach on Sunday morning! I am trying to save the saints!" (1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 2:9-10). Exhort one another every day as long as it is today. Christians should exhort one another so that there will not be in you an evil heart of unbelief, leading you to fall away from the living God. The Word of God mediated to the people of God keeps the saints saved! Hebrews 3:13-14 amounts to saying: "I don't want you to fall away. I want you to be exhorted. Hold firm your confidence to the end." Look at Hebrews 3:6: We are His house if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope. Hebrews 4:14: Since we have a great high priest, let us hold fast our confession. Hebrews 6:18: Hold fast to the hope that is set before you. Hebrews 10:23: Let us hold fast our confession of hope without wavering. Hebrews 10:35: Do not throw away your confidence, which has great reward. This whole book is about joyful, confident, assured perseverance that lives a

radical lifestyle of love. This means that if there is an evil heart of unbelief in somebody you are counseling, you need to warn him or her that he or she might not go to heaven.

A missionary, twenty-eight years of age, comes into my office. She is married, with two children, and is back from the field. She comes to confess to me that she is living in adultery. She is disappointed with her husband. He is so emotionally inadequate that when she got back, a man befriended her and she and this man wound up in bed together. She feels awful about her marriage, and she does not want to leave the adulterous affair. She tells me all of this, and I say in response: "You know what you have to do. God can handle this. This can be fixed. You don't have to have a ruined life or your husband have a ruined ministry. Tonight you don't go back to this man, right?" She says, "No. I'm going back." I ask, "Why would you do that?" "I need it. My husband's just not there for me." I say to her, "You know, if you go on pursuing this relationship, you have no warrant that you are born of God and heading for heaven." She looks at me and says, "You're crazy! I have been saved, and I am eternally secure. Maybe someday I'll repent and maybe I won't, but you can't tell me I am lost! I have trusted Christ." I say, "Well, you may or may not have, I don't know. But I can give you no assurance, on the basis of your present behavior. If you go on in this, you should not believe that you are saved." She becomes so angry that she leaves in a huff.

I tell you this story because I got a letter from her ten years later. They went back to the field. I don't know if the liaison continued through the mail or not, but she wrote me a long letter, saying that nobody in her life knew how much she struggled with sexual sin. She said, "I slept with so many men, you wouldn't believe it. I thought I had a need. *Nobody* ever told me what you said, and I want to thank you. I believe now exactly what you said, and it's keeping me out of bed and helping me fight the fight." I talked to her recently, and she thanked me again. She said, "Nobody got tough with me like that. Everybody tried to give me some mealy-mouthed, touchy-feely, God-cares-for-you kind of answer. Nobody frightened me except you." I believe the book of Hebrews has

all these warnings for the sake of assurance, not to militate against assurance.

Hebrews does not teach that salvation can once be had through new birth but then be lost.

It gives sharp warnings, that cause people great distress about this matter: “lest you fall away from the living God” (3:12; cf. 6:6-8, 10:26-31). I want to affirm the great biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, meaning that if you have been justified, you

hard to figure out. You *have* become born of God, united with Jesus Christ, full partaker of all of His heavenly and eternal benefits and thus everlastingly secure if you hold fast. The holding fast is the evidence and sign that you became a partaker. It does not say that you *will* be a partaker if you hold fast. That would throw everything up for grabs. It says, “You have become a partaker if you hold fast.” If you don’t hold fast, it isn’t that you lost your partaking; you never had a partaking. That is the meaning

Daily counseling sustains faith, inspires joy, enables perseverance, and spurs love.

will be glorified. Romans 8:30 to me is an incontrovertible teaching of the perseverance of the justified. “Those whom He justified He also glorified.” But that does not negate the seriousness of the warnings to *professing* Christians, and that is all I ever have in front of me as far as I know: I have a church full of professing Christians. I preach to them what the Bible says: “If you do such things, you will not enter into the kingdom” (Gal. 5:23, 1 Cor. 6:9), and the warnings of Hebrews. I have people come up to me, saying, “Do you think you can lose your salvation?” I didn’t say that. Don’t infer that. Why don’t I infer that from this text, where it says, “...lest there be in you an unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God”? There are two reasons.

One is that you can fall away from the living God in lots of ways before you are saved. There are ways to come near to God, experience things about God, and even have enablements of the Spirit to do certain signs and wonders and still not be saved, not be born again. But the other reason is from the text. The NASB gets it exactly right: “We have become partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm to the end” (3:14). Notice the tense of the verbs. “We have become partakers of Christ [that is past with a present effect] if [and then he gives a future contingency] we hold fast the beginning of our assurance.” Something *has happened* in the past if something *does happen* in the future. Do you see that? That is perplexing, isn’t it? But it is not

the verse demands. We have become partakers if we hold fast. If we do not hold fast, we have not become partakers. So, I do not think the book of Hebrews jeopardizes the doctrine of eternal security or the perseverance of the saints.

In contrast, Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16 make much of the New Covenant, the superior covenant. In those verses the piece of the New Covenant that they quote is twofold: (1) “I will forgive their sins and remember their iniquities no more” and (2) “I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts.” What does that mean? “I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts.” That means God is not just coming to the church and saying, “Okay, here is the standard. Measure up, and we will see whether you qualify for the judgment.” Rather, He says, “Okay, here is a law.” Flesh meets it and begins to rebel. God, triumphantly in His New Covenant people, penetrates through the rebellion, overcomes all resistance, and writes His law on the heart, not just on tablets, which means the heart loves what God says and is thus drawn out joyfully to comply with her maker. The most beautiful statement—the hope-giving, assurance-giving, perseverance-producing, warfare-encouraging, promise of the New Covenant—is Jeremiah 32:40. I love this text. I give it out all the time because it helps people get a handle on the New Covenant: “I will make with them an everlasting covenant, and I will not turn away from doing them good, and I will put the fear of me

in their hearts so that they will not turn away from me.” If God were not like that, I would be a goner. “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love, here’s my heart, O take and seal it,” with a New Covenant oath and promise that I might have strong encouragement to lay hold of life. So this verse, even though it talks about “lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief, leading you to fall away from the living God,” does not mean that you can have come to God savingly, become a full partaker in all that God is for us in Jesus, be elect, born again, called effectually, and then be lost. It cannot happen! There are a lot of fake conversions; but the real ones persevere in faith, holding onto Christ through the sufferings and the struggle with sin.

Perseverance is a community project.

I say it again, because this is the reason counseling *must* be in the church. The writer of Hebrews’ remedy against falling away is not to say it cannot happen, so don’t worry about being urgent and earnest in the way you talk to each other. No biblical writer takes that view or says to people who are born of God, “You can be indifferent and cavalier about helping each other get saved and stay saved because it is all wrapped up and is automatic.” They never talk that way. They talk like this: “Exhort one another, encourage one another every day, as long as you have another day to do it, lest there be in any of you an evil heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” Daily counseling sustains faith, inspires joy, enables perseverance, and spurs love.

Pastors, when you preach, preach as though souls hang on your message. They do. If you preach the truth and people reject it, shaping their lives around the error, they are lost. It does not matter what professions they made in the past. Perseverance is essential to salvation, and now I am arguing that it is a community project. I want to get my people counseling each other. I want people to use their God-centered, Christ-exalting, God-besotted, Bible-saturated mouths to draw people to Christ and joy, and to warn people about the creeping sins in their lives. We must spot, name, and rescue people from lack of delight in God, indifference to the Scriptures,

and lack of love to minister to others. James 5 says, “If you bring somebody back, you save their soul from death” (paraphrase of v. 20). That’s urgent.

Most churches on Sunday morning don’t act like very much is at stake because pastors themselves don’t believe very much is at stake. Most churches don’t have much counseling for the same reason. They have a theology that says, “They are secure and safe, so I am not sure what I can do except maybe just spread a little icing on the cake here. There might be one or two unbelievers, so maybe I could get urgent with them and sound like something serious is at stake.” What a theology! No wonder we play games. No wonder we want to feel good together. No wonder we hardly talk with each other about important things.

Every time I stand in front of my people, I feel like every one of them could go to hell if they don’t listen to what I am saying. They could be lost. They have a thousand competitors with what I am saying, dragging them down during the week, pulling them away to love everything but God! There are not many voices in my people’s lives waving the banner of delight in God above all things, saying, “Everything is refuse compared to the surpassing value of Jesus Christ. You will not gain Him if other things are more important to you.” People in our congregations are not usually joyous in Christ. They love their new computer programs, what’s for lunch, and what’s on TV more than they love Christ. This indicates a defective heart.

What am I going to do? I am not going to massage them and tell them everything is okay. Hebrews 10:23-24: “Consider one another, and don’t neglect to meet together.” Raise the stakes, pastors, of the small group ministry of your church. Consider one another. Don’t neglect to meet together. Raise the stakes in friendship. Sages, exhort one another every day. Sometimes people ask (and I often ask myself), “How does a once-a-week small group satisfy ‘exhort one another every day?’” That is why God created telephones, and lunch breaks at work. God has allowed a fractured, fragmented, non-neighborhood-oriented society, where nobody knows anybody who lives within a hundred feet, but everybody knows somebody

at work. None of our networks are neighborhood-based anymore. We have e-mail, telephones, faxes—and best of all, people in person. If you can't have the best, get on the phone. Say, "Did you look at any pornography last night? Good. Let's pray and give thanks. 'Thank you, Lord, that Christ is our Savior, and that my friend got through one more day. Amen.' Call your mom. I'll see you tomorrow. Pray for me to stop and really connect with the Lord and with my wife." That's every day.

What we are to exhort one another to flourish in is faith.

"Exhort one another every day as long as it is called 'today' lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief." Unbelief is the prime issue. Our goal in counseling is faith, our goal in preaching is faith, our goal in getting on the telephone is to strengthen faith. Pastors, you should preach for ten or twelve weeks on what faith is because the word "faith" and the word "believe" have become overworked and unhelpful to most believers. My neighborhood is a burned-over, inner-city district with a charismatic Bible college in it. Those folks are good at street witnessing. Every prostitute, every drug dealer, every street person, every drunk knows the story. I meet them on the street. "Can you help me out?" "Yes, I can help you out. I don't have any money, but do you know Christ?" "Oh, yeah, I know Christ." "Do you trust Him?" "I trust Him. He's really cool." What are you going to say? Good words that are crusted over need to get their real meanings and life breathed back in.

It has taken me thirty years to figure this out. Everything I write is to try to find a way to say the obvious in a way that will make people bolt awake and come alive in Jesus. Here's the language we are using now at Bethlehem. Take John 1:12: "As many as received Him, to them He gave power to become the children of God." I now say, "Have you received Jesus as your *treasure* (not Lord, not Savior, although I say those, too)?" People say, "I'm not sure." "Good, that's helpful. Now we can talk about what *faith* is." I wrote 400 pages in *Future Grace*, trying to justify and explain what I mean by this definition of faith: Faith is being satisfied with all that God is for you in Jesus. "I am the bread

of life. He who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst" (John 6:35). The *coming* so as not to hunger is parallel with the *believing* so as not to thirst. Ask, "What is faith in John 6:35?" Believing is coming to Christ so as to have your soul thirst satisfied in all that God is for you in Him.

What is the definition of faith in Hebrews? It openly defines it for us. "Faith is the assurance of things *hoped* for." It is a future orientation, and you hope for *good* things. You don't hope for bad times. Faith is the deep-felt, strong conviction that the future thing you hope for—Christ Himself, no more sin, no more suffering, life—is yours. That's faith in Hebrews.

Therefore, counseling is helping people fight the fight of faith. Oh, to get people into the fight! So many Christians coast. Hebrews has devastating words to say in chapter two about those who drift. Then suddenly the waterfall is there, and over they go. You have to swim to heaven against the current. You have to fight. Don't hear me saying, "Perform works of the law to measure up so God will like you." Everybody here knows that is not what the fight is about. In fact, the fight is specifically against that. To rest in the all-satisfying glory of God through His love is the fight. Our soul is either leading us to luxury or legalism. The fight is not to give way to legalism and not to give way to luxury. Love, delight in, be satisfied by, enjoy, treasure, and value Jesus above all things, so that the law is written on our hearts and we do what He wants us to do. That's the fight worth fighting. Paul comes to the end of his life and says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." That's the fight.

Teach your people how to fight. Counseling is war. We will fight for people's souls by getting at the truth. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). That is not just for unbelievers. That is for the person in adultery, the person in addiction, in discouragement, in worry, or in bitterness. Faith comes by hearing a Spirit-anointed word. Let me tie this in with what I said about love and being loved. I have a burden for my people right now, just like I do for myself, that we get beyond propositions and

Bible verses to Christ. I do not mean “get around” Bible verses, but “through” Bible verses to Christ, to the person, the living person, to know Him, cherish Him, treasure Him, enjoy Him, trust Him, be at home with Him. I want to count Him more to be desired than all other things—wife, husband, children, success in career, leisure, vacations, health, food, sex, money. He’s more precious.

Here’s an illustration I used in a recent sermon. My wife, Noël, is in Georgia. I am sleeping by myself these two days, and it’s weird—nobody at my back. (She puts her back against my back and whoosh! I go to sleep.) She’s not there. So I’m lying there in this big empty house. She has our little girl, Talitha, with her. The four boys are grown and gone. The house is empty. When you’re alone and the house is empty and you’re wired like I am, morose (you need to know that I write all these books about joy because I want it, not because I have it; the book is called *Desiring God*, not *I Have Arrived at Joy in God*), I lay my head on the pillow and I pray. It’s a Saturday night and I talk to God. “Lord, I’m going to go to sleep now, I hope. I have to preach in the morning. Would

deeply. If all you know is a list of attributes and you don’t ever go through the list to the Person and enjoy Him and walk with Him and say with the Apostle Paul, ‘He stood by me, and I was able to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and the Roman praetorian,’ then you don’t know what faith is.” Faith is being satisfied with all that God is for us in Jesus. Not being satisfied with preaching, with church growth, with effective counseling, but with God, the Person, the only thing you will have when you die. Is He enough?

This faith is the root of all love and good deeds.

Faith and love are what you preserve, deepen, enhance, and enlarge in mutual one-on-one lay counseling in small groups. This is why Hebrews 10:24 speaks differently than 3:12-13. It says, “Consider one another, how to stir each other up to love and good works.” It doesn’t say, “Consider how to stir one another up to have a believing heart,” which is the idea behind 3:12-13. We’ve got 3:12-13 down. We’re moving now in the book of Hebrews to a radical lifestyle in chapters 10 through 13. The

Faith is being satisfied with all that God is for us in Jesus.

You help me right now, as I go to sleep, to so see You, so know You, to be so authentic with You and You so authentic spiritually to me in all I know about You from the Bible, that I would be so content in You that if in an hour and a half, in my sleep, my heart stopped beating and I died, and that very moment woke in heaven and thought I was dreaming and You reached out and pinched me and said, ‘It’s not a dream,’ that would be okay. No more Noël, no more sex, no more little six-year-old Talitha, no more pizza, no more preaching, no more ‘Isn’t John Piper nice to have at a conference?’ No more—just Jesus.” I said, “Jesus, would You let me know You so well that that would be gain. Lose it all; gain.”

I told my people that. I said, “That’s what I want for you. I want to help you get there. I want you to know Him that well, love Him that

question is, “Where does a radical lifestyle of love come from?” It comes from faith, and the faith being preserved by people exhorting you daily. But now the writer says it plainly in 10:24: “Stir one another up to love and good works.” How does that happen?

Maybe the way to draw things toward a close here would be to take some sample ways that faith works love. Do you remember my definition of counseling? It ended on being lovers of people, having the mark of health, the mark of faith. “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Let’s see how that works by looking at four texts. I use these over and over in my life to test whether or not I am in love with Jesus as I ought to be, and whether I love people. Hebrews 10:34: “You had compassion on those in prison, and you

joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you, yourselves, have a better possession and an abiding one." The craziest and most amazingly inexplicable word in that verse is "joyfully." "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property." Those who have compassion on others are not in love with property. Their property has been plundered, the windows broken, maybe their house set on fire. They went to the prison to visit their Christian friends, and it cost them. When they saw in the distance their houses burning, they did not say, "Where's God?" I'm so tired of hearing that. I should not talk like that as a pastor; I must be long-suffering; forgive me for getting tired of it. I am always going to have people come to me after the service and ask questions I have tried to answer for twenty years. But I am tired of hearing that, frankly. I would like to see a church, an evangelical movement in America that, instead of saying, "Where's God?" when their houses burn down, they rejoice. They're too busy loving God and people. That's in the text. I didn't make that up. That's not a pastoral, rhetorical flourish and overstatement. You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, probably with tears, too. If my house burned down, do you know what I would cry over? Thirty-three volumes of journals. Books I can replace. I can't replace journals containing all the Lord has taught me since I was twenty years old. I don't mean I wouldn't have tears. You do have a category, don't you, all you counselor-types, of joyful weeping and grieving joy? "Weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice"—at the same time. You can't be a pastor if you cannot do both. Last Sunday a twenty-three-year-old daughter of a pastoral staff member gave birth to a healthy baby, and, that same day, Jamie Berglund, a twenty-three-year-old in my church, died of Hodgkin's disease. Weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice, pastor (Rom. 12:15). "I heard about Jamie last night. This is hard" and "Congratulations, Grandpa." You have those categories, don't you? You love.

This is how faith yields radical love to go to the prison. Here you are asking, "Should we go to the prison or not? If we go to the prison, they are going to know we are Christians. If

they know we are Christians, we get thrown in prison or they burn down our house. What do we do?" Answer? Look at Hebrews 10:34: "You knew that you, yourselves, have a better possession and an abiding one." Faith is the assurance of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1). We have heaven, we have possessions, we have Christ. Let's go, let's love, let the chips fall where they will. That's the kind of people I am preaching for. Muslims all over the world don't want missionaries to come. I want to breed a generation that will go right into the sword, right into the gun, and preach Jesus as long as they are given breath. How are you going to produce a church like that? By having a whole lot of counselors who continually exhort others every day lest there be in them an evil heart of unbelief. Unbelief is lack of satisfaction in Christ, loving the comforts and securities of this world more than we love people.

Let me mention the other three texts I use to consider whether I love Jesus and others enough. Moses, because of what God was going to be for him in Jesus, "bears reproach for the Christ" (Heb. 11:24-26). When God is my treasure, I can take criticism and opposition, and keep loving. "For the joy set before Him," Jesus did the greatest act of love that ever was (Heb. 12:1-2). Joy motivates the deepest acts of painful, self-sacrificing love. To be satisfied in God makes me lay down my life, not live selfishly. "Therefore, let us go to Him outside the camp, bearing reproach that He endured. For here we have no lasting city. We seek a city which is to come" (Heb. 13:13). Are you satisfied in the city to come where God is? Will you walk away from comfort and toward need? That's the reversal I am preaching for all the time, and it's what I want my small groups and my sages to be counseling for, moving away from comfort and toward need, at any cost. You will make that move (it's called love) if you don't have an evil heart of unbelief that enamors you with the praises of men, the pleasures of family, and the lures of success. Instead, if you are ravished by the glory of God and show it by laying down your life for others, guess who gets the glory? This is where Hebrews ends. It goes like this: "Now may the God of peace (He is our hope!), who brought again from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep,

our Lord Jesus Christ, through the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good, working in you (may the Lord perform His Word) that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever" (Heb. 13:20-21).

If you are satisfied in Him, you are released to do what pleases God. What pleases God is to get involved in people's lives. Then Jesus will get the glory. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, I plead with you now to

perform this word in me. Oh, how I want to be what I preach! I want these friends also to be God-centered, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated spokesmen for you in order to help people become God-besotted, cheerfully self-forgetting lovers of people, no matter the cost. Lord, if you would do that in 800 people, the effects on churches, nations, and peoples around the world would be untold. We together say, "Do it!" Perform your word, I pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.