

Women Counseling Women

ELYSE
FITZPATRICK
GENERAL EDITOR



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BIBLICAL COUNSELING: REAL HELP FOR REAL WOMEN

§ Elyse Fitzpatrick §

Like you, I frequent grocery stores. And like you, I scan the headlines of the magazines and newspapers while I wait my turn to slide the debit card and be on my way. Although there are times when the headlines of some “newspapers” are laugh-out-loud funny—“Monkey Boy Actually Nostradamus!”—most of the headlines are heartbreaking: “Famous Starlet Arrested Again!” “Beautiful Couple’s Marriage on the Rocks!” “Celebrated Director in Drug and Alcohol Rehab!” And these are reports of the lives of people we’re tempted to envy. They’re the ones who are able to take long and luxurious vacations, who have achieved the American dream, who have access to all the “best” help. And yet something is desperately wrong. Not money, fame, nor beauty can shelter any of us from it. We’re not shocked by the troubles of the rich and famous because, at heart, we know they’re just like us. We know that *we’re all in trouble and we all need help*. How would the headlines of our lives read? Aside from the paparazzi, are we all that different?

Yes, we’ve got significant problems and we’re all looking for answers. No one will argue with you about that. Now, they may argue with you about the *source* of our troubles or whether our troubles are as bad as we think they are. But everyone acknowledges that things just aren’t as they should be. We look around at the state of affairs in our country, in our family, in our hearts, and we know, without anyone telling us, something is desperately wrong.

And so we search and search for a solution to this innate “wrongness” that we feel, that we see. We read articles, we surf the Web, we watch programs featuring the latest self-help guru who assures us that he’s finally found the answer we’ve been looking for. But nothing satisfies. Nothing really solves the problem. Yes, perhaps for a day or two, or even a month or two, we seem to find some relief, but then we find ourselves back at our starting point again: We’re still in trouble, we still need help.

So we start over again and eventually discover much to our dismay, that every one of these “helpful” voices offers a different solution to our problem. We’re not only in trouble and in need of help, but everyone seems to have a different (and usually conflicting) answer! Some of the answers we’re given assure us that we can solve our problems ourselves—that we’ve got everything we need inside us already. We just need to believe in ourselves and access our own power, they say.

Others tout their special secret formula for success—and at \$19.99, they tell us it’s quite a bargain. If we would just follow their advice carefully, we would find our problems disappearing. And then still others tell us that there aren’t any true-for-all-time answers, life just is as it is, and we should give up trying to change and learn to live with it.

So our days go by and troubles multiply as we try one futile strategy after another. We try hard for a season, but then either the strategy or our willpower fails. So we pick up another strategy and after a bit it fails, too. And on and on it goes until we just give up for a season and go watch TV or take a nap...that is, until we hear about another exciting new fail-safe solution, and we feel hopeful and start all over again.

The One Light Shining in the Dark

Standing in stark contrast to this dismal, futile cycle of trouble-hope-despair-trouble-hope-despair, the Bible shines as a beacon of ageless wisdom and eternal hope. Without mincing words, it clearly identifies the source of all our troubles while it also powerfully displays the only way to true life transformation. But don’t be confused. The Bible is not a self-help book. Written on every page is this truth: We *can’t* help ourselves.

The Bible teaches us to be properly hopeless about our ability to

change. No, it isn't very flattering to us. It tells us that our problems are so bad, so deeply rooted, so intrinsic to our very nature that we're utterly unable to change, or as the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah put it, "Can...the leopard [change] his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil" (Jeremiah 13:23). Can you transform the bent of your own heart? No, of course you can't. You know that's true because you've tried...and failed. Yes we can move the furniture of our lives around or tidy things up a bit. But we can't truly change who we are at heart—especially when we're alone or when we think no one is watching. The Bible says we're powerless to change ourselves.

Although the Bible's perspective on our abilities seems discouraging at first, the truth is that it's really very freeing. While it's counterintuitive, there's actually great freedom and hope in knowing and accepting our limitations. It's like this: If I had contracted a crippling disease but was unaware of it, I would undoubtedly be frustrated and discouraged when I tried to walk. I would keep raging against my stupid legs and trying to insist that my muscles work as I think they should. I would continually try to get myself going, only to end up in failure and despair once again. But, once I get an accurate diagnosis, even if that diagnosis is heartbreaking, I'll begin to embrace my inability and know that if I want to get around I'll need to find a new way, and learn to live life within my weakness. That's just what the Bible does for us. It tells us that we're too far gone to expect any help from ourselves. It teaches us to rely on help from outside. It's a hard truth but it's a good and necessary one.

We're the Source of Our Troubles

The Bible is very clear about the source of our troubles, too. This is one of those places where the truth of God's Word and the "wisdom" of the world collide dramatically. The world assures us that our problems stem from any of a number of places: our upbringing, our education, the economy, the environment, the government, "those" people, our brain chemicals, and on and on.

But the Bible paints a different picture. It teaches us quite clearly about the source of our troubles. As the well-known British scholar, G.K. Chesterton, once quipped in response to a newspaper reporter's query, "What's wrong with the world today?" His answer? "Dear Sir, I

am.” The Bible clearly teaches that *we* are the source of our problems. And specifically, our sin is the fountainhead from which all sorrow, suffering, difficulty, and death in the world flows. Of course, that’s not to say that there is always an exact one-for-one correlation between a specific sin we commit and some difficulty that we face—although, of course that may be true. It’s just that sin is the cause of all the trouble everyone in the world faces.

Let me try to illustrate this for you. Just think for a moment what the world would be like if there were no sin. No one would cut you off on the freeway; no child would go to bed hungry; no one would waste away in prison or waste themselves in drug-induced oblivion. And imagine what you would be like. You would always love and it wouldn’t ever be a question or a struggle to do so. You would love others because you loved to do so. You would never be cranky or selfish or worried or self-indulgent because you would know that you are loved and you love. When we view sin from the perspective of living a life of love in a loving world, it’s easy to see how we’re the problem. Chesterton was right. What’s wrong with the world today? We are.

The Bible says that what’s wrong with our lives and everyone else’s life is that we sin—this poverty of love is called sin. Sin is a refusal to love God or our neighbor, ignoring the two great commands of God’s law (Matthew 22:36–40). And why don’t we love God or others like we should? We don’t love because we don’t believe that we’ve been loved (1 John 4:19). We refuse to believe that God is as loving as He says He is. And because we don’t believe that “God is love” (1 John 4:8,16), we fall short of God’s loving intention for our lives and we create other lesser gods to take His place—gods that make us feel loved, gods like acceptance, power, safety and comfort.

This is called idolatry. All of our sin flows out of unbelief and idolatry: *unbelief* that God is as loving and good as He says He is; *idolatry* that we have to live for and worship no one but ourselves in order to be happy. And even though some of us have been Christians for decades, we all struggle to believe in God’s goodness and worship Him alone. We’re all sinners—unbelieving, idolatrous sinners. Here’s one way that the Bible describes our condition: “for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns

for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13). We forsake the loving God and we make other gods to take His place.

The Solution to the Sinner’s Problem

The sin that we *all* commit when we fail to love God above all else or to love others the way we already love ourselves is the source of *all* the world’s problems. And it is, in some measure, the source of all the problems we’re facing today. Perhaps you are trying to love but someone else is being hateful to you. Or, perhaps you’ve been consistently unloving and now you’re facing the consequences of a broken marriage or habitually angry children. In any case, our unbelief and idolatry, our lovelessness are the reasons for the troubles we face today, whether we’re sinning against someone or they’re sinning against us, and it’s why we’re constantly looking for help.

We’re assuming that up to this point, you’ve probably agreed with most of what we’ve said. Yes, sin—everyone’s sin—is the problem. Yes, we’ve all failed to love. But if sin is the problem, what is the solution? Is there a solution that really helps? Really transforms? Yes, of course there is. But the answer doesn’t originate in anything we can do. This answer bypasses all our “self” help. And this is another place where the Bible’s answers collide violently with the answers from the world...and even from some people in the church.

Here’s an illustration of the many different kinds of answers we can encounter: Let’s say that Jane is married and the mom of three. Let’s also say that her husband, Joe, is disengaged and spends his leisure time golfing and watching television. Jane is tired, angry, distant, sullen, and demanding. She vengefully spends more money than she should.

Joe is oblivious, self-centered, and immature. He can’t understand what Jane’s problem is: He goes to work and provides for her. So why shouldn’t he reap some of the rewards for his labors on the golf course? Besides, he goes to church with her on Sunday and he wishes Jane were more submissive to him. Both Jane and Joe would say that they’re Christians and that they believe that Jesus died for their sin. But they’re in need of real help and that old gospel story seems insufficient, weak, and hackneyed.

Now, how would you help Jane and Joe? If you believe that Jane

is an empty love-cup who needs to be filled by Joe's attentions, you might tell her to demand more of his time or learn how to communicate her needs in a way that satisfies her desires. If you believe that Joe requires more respect and needs to let his wild masculinity run free, you'll encourage him to tell Jane more about his needs and not be a slave to her demands. After all, both Jane and Joe need to love themselves more and take care of meeting their own needs before they can meet the needs of the other, right?

If, on the other hand, you believe that Jane and Joe are both victims of dysfunctional homes, you might have Jane write a letter to her parents, telling them how their continual fighting has ruined her ability to communicate lovingly with Joe. You might tell her to sign up for assertiveness training or classes on communicating in her own special love language. Or you might have Joe confront his dad how his alcoholism and distance has wrecked his relationship with Jane so that he is cold and unloving. Perhaps Joe should join a recovery group for children of alcoholics so he can be with other people who understand him.

Or, you might simply say that both Jane and Joe's problems stem from some sort of chemical imbalance in their brains and advise them to see a physician and get on medication.

Obviously, the problem with such solutions is that they don't solve our unbelief-idolatry-love problem. In fact, they make it worse. Instead of teaching Jane and Joe that the goal of their life is to bring glory to God by loving God and neighbor, these solutions end up showing them ways to get more of what they selfishly crave. They teach them strategies to serve their idols, to love themselves, to dismiss God's great love for them. So perhaps they'll be a little happier for a season, but their hearts won't be transformed, and that deadly, poisonous root will remain just as entrenched as it ever was. And, sadly, in the end, every one of these methods is doomed to failure.

Rather than turning to the empty philosophies of the world that bend us in on ourselves, Jane and Joe (and the rest of us) need to look outward, away from ourselves and our "wisdom" to a wisdom that is from above (James 3:17). We need God's wisdom, and His wisdom is found in Scripture, and particularly in Scripture's testimony to the good news about Jesus Christ.

Jesus...Again?

You'll remember that we said that the Bible is not a self-help book. That's because, as we've seen, God knows we're unable to help ourselves. We don't need self-help; we can't use it. We need Other-help. We need a Savior. We need Someone outside of ourselves who can rescue us from ourselves, our sin, our unbelief, and our idolatry. Those of us who are already Christians believe this truth: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). I'm sure that about now you're nodding and saying, *Yes, I believe that. But I need something more right now. I believe the gospel, but I don't see how it applies in my situation.* Though we may know that the gospel story is true, we can easily assume or think that its significance pretty much ends after we get saved. Jesus again...really?

The Bible teaches that it is the gospel of Jesus Christ—the good news about what He's *already* done for us—that transforms our lives. This good news is the true story about the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God and it really is astonishing! It tells us that although we are unbelieving, idolatrous, unloving sinners, we've been loved and adopted by God! At great cost to Himself, at great cost to His Son, our heavenly Father has made a way for us to return to Him and to be transformed into people who resemble Him. Every true Christian believes these wonderful truths, and yet there seems to be a disconnect for people like Joe and Jane when it comes to their personal problems. How exactly is the gospel relevant when our lives aren't progressing like we thought they would?

Let's revisit the story of Joe and Jane again to see how the Bible and specifically the gospel would help them. Because the Bible clearly teaches the husband is the head of his household (Ephesians 5:23), we'll start with Joe. Although he is a good provider, Joe has missed the point entirely. The Bible tells him to love his wife as Christ loved the church and "gave himself up" for her (Ephesians 5:25). Joe is giving his wife money but he's withholding himself. He isn't giving up his time or his heart to her. No, he's holding onto his own life. So, although he says he loves Jane, he doesn't live like that is the case. He serves his idols of fun and relaxation and a veg-out zone. He loves himself more than his nearest neighbor. And he's forgotten how he's been loved by God.

You see, if he really remembered God's great love for him, he would know that he didn't need to hang onto his life. He could freely lose it in order to gain it.

Jesus wouldn't advise Joe to learn how to procure respect from Jane. He'd tell him,

Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (Matthew 16:25-27).

But that's not all Joe needs to remember. He also needs to remember he has a Savior, a loving Bridegroom who has done what Joe has neglected to do. Jesus gave up His life so that Joe would live. Christ perfectly loved His bride so that Joe would have a record of perfect love before his Father, the Holy Judge. Joe has forgotten the gospel he says he believes.

In light of the love Jesus has bestowed on Joe, he can learn to love Jane. That means that on the commute home from work he should pray that the Lord would grant him the energy and interest to take an active part in his home. Although he'll be tempted to plop down in front of the television, Joe should sit down with his kids and listen to what they have to say. He could help out in the kitchen or offer to take the kids out for ice cream while Jane relaxes in a warm bath. All the while he will have to remember he isn't doing these things because he's trying to get something from Jane, earn an early tee-time on Saturday, or gain brownie points from God.

As long as Joe's motivation remains self-centered, then he is doing good only for himself, out of self-love, rather than out of love for God or Jane. Instead, Joe should remember that he is to love Jane because he's been loved by God, as the apostle John pointed out: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). So when Joe does what is right, whether Jane responds in kind or not, Joe can take satisfaction in knowing that he's living in grateful obedience to God.

Jane needs the gospel, too. Jane began her marriage hoping that Joe would be the answer to all her dreams. She's longed to have a deep relationship with him, but as the kids came along and Joe pulled away, she's

found satisfaction in her children and friends and especially in shopping. Vengefully she thinks, *If he thinks that money is all I want, then fine. I'll just spend it faster than he can make it.*

Although Jane's attitude may be understandable, she is guilty of unbelief, idolatry, and selfishness, too. To begin with, Jane craved something from her husband that he was never meant to give her. She wrongly believed that he would be the "love of her life" who would satisfy her deep desire to know and be known. She looked to him to save her from a life of loneliness, insecurity, and boredom. But Joe was never meant to be her savior; no, that position is already filled.

In addition, Jane has forgotten the servant-love of Jesus Christ, the One who washed the feet of those who were about to desert Him in His most desperate hour. The disciples slept as He wept in the garden. They ran away into the night and denied that they even knew Him. One even betrayed the King of Love. Yes, Joe has also been guilty of deserting Jane, but she's done worse to her Savior. She's erected idols in her heart and she's worshipped them by acting in unkind, self-indulgent ways. She's let hopelessness infect her soul and obliterate her faith.

But Jesus hasn't forgotten Jane. Even now He's bearing her flesh, interceding for her before the throne of her Father, praying for her, guiding and protecting her. She's withheld her love from Him, but He hasn't returned her evil. He's overcome her evil with good.

And so, in light of what Jesus has done for Jane, she can love Joe. She can begin by repenting of idolizing him and expecting him to do something for her he was unable to do. He can't satisfy the longings of her heart; he can't make her truly blessed.

Jane can then walk in the footsteps of her Savior and learn what it means to love the disengaged and selfish. She can tell Joe that she loves him and that she wants to have a relationship with him but if he refuses, she can continue to love because she's been loved. And then, in all the ways that Jane will continue to fall back into her old sullen patterns of sinful self-pity and self-indulgence, she can rest in the glorious truth that she's been the recipient of the perfect record of Jesus Christ. She's not just forgiven, she's righteous! His loving record is hers before God—when He looks at her, He says, "This is My beloved daughter. She makes Me happy."

Real Women and Their Real Savior

We're all very well aware of the fact we've got problems. We sin. Others sin against us. We live in a sin-cursed world. We also know that there are as many different answers to our problems as there are problems themselves. But there is only one answer strong enough to transform us into loving, humble servants. Every other answer only takes us more toward sin, unbelief, idolatry, and lovelessness. The answer we need is found in the Bible and because every part of the Bible testifies about Jesus (Luke 24:44), the answer is found in Jesus Himself.

The Bible isn't a self-help book. It isn't a book of heroes (aside from One!), nor is it a book of rules. The Bible is the story of God's love for us and His determination to have a people for His own pleasure and our unending joy. The Bible is the only book that can correctly diagnose our sin problem. It reveals our deepest hearts, even down to our inmost thoughts and motives (Hebrews 4:12). No other system of help can do that.

The Bible is also the only book that can give us real hope, power, and motivation for change. Because of God's love demonstrated in the gospel and most powerfully at Calvary, we can have hope. As Paul put it so beautifully thousands of years ago, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). In typical ancient near-Eastern fashion, Paul argued for our hope from the greater to the lesser. "Look," he said, "if God is willing to give up His beloved Son for you, why would you doubt His love? If He is willing to give you the greatest gift ever given, why would He withhold any blessing from you?" You can have hope today simply because God loved you so dearly that He gave his Son for you and then powerfully raised Him from death so that you could live with Him eternally. Now *that's* something to hope in.

There is also power for you to experience change because of the resurrection. The Bible tells us that the enslaving power of sin in our lives was broken when Christ overcame the punishment for sin—that is, death—through His resurrection.

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, *just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of*

the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. . . We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin (Romans 6:4,6, emphasis added).

The only hope we have to overcome our sin, idolatry, unbelief, and lovelessness is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But what a lively hope that is! He died once and will never die again so that right now He's providentially protecting and providing everything we need to persevere through this difficult life and join Him in eternal happiness.

And finally, there's only one motive that will stand the test of time, that will enable us to keep serving, keep obeying, keep believing, even when the trials we face seem interminable. The motive: love. But how can we love? What will make us love? This *and only* this: God's prior love for us. If we start our day thinking about our obligation to love, serve, and believe, we'll very shortly find ourselves falling into either pride (because we're doing so well) or despair (because we're not). But if we start (and stay) with this thought: Jesus Christ loves me and gave Himself up for me, ensuring my Father's smile on me no matter how the day wears on, we'll know the joys of obedience and repentance. We'll understand the promise in our Savior's words: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:16).

The Bible is the only book that has sufficient, deeply profound and yet amazingly simple answers to life's problems. Yes, we have a problem: We're sinners. But that's not all. We've been given real help: We've been loved. And this love is powerful enough and long-lasting enough to change everything about us and about our world. This love is genuinely and eternally life-transforming. It makes us new.

Now, this love isn't some impersonal force. This love is embodied in human form in our Savior, in the One who has gone through every temptation we face and so is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15). He knows that we have real problems and He's given us a real answer: Himself. He was willing to leave the bliss of heaven and become a real man with thoughts and feelings and desires just like ours. He embraced us when He embraced our mortal flesh. He was stripped of His glories so we could be clothed in His goodness. And

He forfeited the pleasure of uninterrupted fellowship with His beloved Father so we could share in that relationship forever.

Yes, we have real problems, but Christ has given us His life. Yes, we're real women who need real answers, but He's a real Savior who has supplied all we need. And so we look to Him, solely to Him, and we find that our hearts are satisfied. Our lives are transformed and our deepest problems are solved in the shadow of the cross.

Recommended Resources

Fitzpatrick, Elyse and Dennis Johnson. *Counsel from the Cross*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009.