

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

Another quality of an effective encourager, an extension of being a good listener, is to be

slow to speak

Proverbs 12:18; 13:3; 17:27-28; 29:20.

Prov. 12:18— *"Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."* 13:3— *"He who guards his lips guards his soul, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin."* 17:27-28— *"A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered. Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue."*

One who is slow to speak guards his tongue and uses his words with restraint. As we said about the good listener, this means he doesn't feel he must immediately come up with a fantastic response when another shares a need or problem.

Therefore, if we don't know what to say, or we really have no experience in the area being discussed, we should admit our lack. Some are afraid to do that, so they either stare in absolute silence, or gush out with a stock answer. Response may be needed, but be honest about what you know.

Here are a couple of responses if you draw an absolute blank:

- "Could we pray? I have to admit I really need some wisdom from the Lord right now.."
- "Can I get back to you in a couple of days? I want us both to give your situation some thought and prayer, because I'm at a loss right now. Let's keep a record of what God says to us in our prayers and in the study of the Scripture, and come back and share our findings."
- "This is really something I think you need to see a pastor about, or a professional counselor. Can I help you find the appropriate person to talk to? I will stay with you through the process, however. If you need someone further to talk with, I'll be available to share in the discoveries and the times of reflection. How does that sound to you?"

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

- "I really believe you already have the solution in mind. I want to encourage you to take this week to pray and read what the Scripture has to say, then I'd like to get back together with you and hear what your decision is. If you need some help then, I'll be glad to give what insight I can."

A helpful counselor must

possess good timing and tact

Prov. 15:23,28— *"A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!... The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil."*
Also 25:11; 21:23; 29:20.

TIMING: *"How good is a timely word...."* Here is a counselor who may have the right response, but is waiting for the right time to share it. We all know we are more likely to respond to counsel at a time when we are ready.

He

re are some often inappropriate occasions to give counsel:

- Exhaustion. Do you remember how the Lord dealt with Elijah? God waited until he had some rest and food before He asked Elijah about his condition.
- Grieving. Notice the Lord's response to Mary in John 11:1-44. What is needed in a time of grieving is first insight—help and companionship focused on the loss, not a whole list of other problems that this person may need to deal with.
- Hunger. Do you remember Esau's state of mind when he came in from the fields hungry (Gen. 25:29ff)? Wives are already aware of this in relationship to their husbands.
- Bitterness. Deal with the bitterness first—Heb. 12:14-15.
- Sickness or emotional instability. Try to get the most pressing physical and emotional needs handled first—Prov. 15:15,13; 17:22. How do you think David would have responded to correction if someone had interrupted him in the middle of one of his "imprecatory psalms"—those in which David expressed a full rage of emotion to God about those who were giving him problems. That person may have become an object of David's wrath as well (see parts of Psalms 12, 35, 58, 59, 69, 70, 83, 109, 137, 140). What's the answer—saying nothing? No, a wise person will, however, be aware of the present physical and emotional strain a person might be under and use wisdom in the timing of counsel. There is no right or

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

wrong time that can be prescribed for these kinds of situations. We must pray to determine the appropriate timing.

The complementary quality to timing is:

TACT: *"The heart of the righteous weighs its answer..."* Our timing is critical, but so is our tact—how we say our words. So a wise friend thinks about how his response will sound to the one he is addressing. If possible, therefore, we might write out our counsel and see how it looks and sounds.

Negative example: Don't be one who says: "Well, I call them like I see them and here's what I think..." Or, "I don't pull any punches—I just say it like it is." That may sound noble, but if it isn't tactful we will bring no joy to the hurting, and may indeed "gush evil"—Proverbs 15:23, 28.

Positive example: Study the example of Jesus and the woman at the well—John 4:1-26. Notice the timing and the tact He used.

be gentle in speech

Prov. 15:1— *"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."* 26:21— *"As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife."* 25:15— *"...a gentle tongue can break a bone."*
Also 2 Tim. 2:24-26.

These verses remind us a person may come to us for counsel and insight in a frenzy of emotion and even anger. He may even misdirect that anger and focus it toward us. When that happens, one of the most healing and helpful things we can do is respond with gentleness, which can help to turn away their wrath—15:21. That doesn't mean that we somehow avoid being honest, however. Even a gentle answer, rightly timed, can break a bone—25:15.

ILLUSTRATION: John 8:7— *"If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."* (See also Matthew 18: 4:-6. Jesus' simple reply caused the soldiers to draw back and fall down..)

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

Lawrence Crabb says: "This gentleness means 'seasoned with grace.' Gentle words may resemble the soft, firm touch of the shepherd's crook guiding the sheep down the safest path"—Lawrence Crabb (Ibid, p. 116). Colossians 4:6 urges, "*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*"

That leads to another key quality and ability of effective counselors: they

have a habit of asking questions before making statements

Prov. 18:17—"*The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.*" (Also John 4:4-42 and 5: 1-14.)

Many caregivers are unaware of the importance of actively listening to others. For instance, have you learned to pay attention to the concerns of people around you? Do you listen to what they say or to what they feel? If we are going to be effective as people helpers, then knowing what our friends and family are saying about various issues and concerns can be very valuable to our effectiveness.

Things are not always what they appear to be, or even what they are said to be. Sometimes a good question or series of questions is needed to reveal errors in thinking or in the facts. Therefore, we should ask well-reasoned questions before we make many statements. This is crucial because it helps to set the right tone in a conversation.

Before we give counsel or correction, it's wise to know if our perception is even accurate. If we don't ask good questions, we may misinterpret. It's always possible we have misunderstood what we have seen or heard. Maybe the person is mumbling, or isn't using the words he intended because he is nervous or angry.

We might also project our weakness on the person, assuming the hurting person has our own problems. We have the tendency to notice our problems in others, so we assume that if

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

someone has a problem that sounds like ours, it must mean he is like us. So be careful about jumping to conclusions.

Even if we are convinced our perception is correct, we need to be wise in how we get others to open up to us, and a well-timed opening question or series of questions can do just that. Who can show us how to do this? The model for asking good questions is Jesus. We have many great examples of His ability in the Scripture. Let's observe His methods in a couple of situations to show the power of a rightly-timed question.

By the way, let me point out something that many people don't pick up on. The Bible isn't only a message book, it is also a method book. So listen to the words of Jesus (they are life), but also watch His methods. Our observations about methodology are not inerrant like Scripture is, but they can be helpful in guiding us to reveal truth to one who needs help.

For instance, Jesus didn't always feel it necessary to respond to a person's problem with an immediate solution. Many times He'd ask a question of the needy person before He would comment or do anything else about his need.

Here are a few examples:

In *John 5:6* (the man at the pool): *"When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked: 'Do you want to get well?'"*

What an absurd question, some might say. But it seems Jesus wanted the man to reveal his thinking—why he believed he hadn't been healed.

In *Matthew 9:28* (the two blind men): Jesus asked them: *"Do you believe I am able to do this?"* Was there a need for confession of their faith? Notice Jesus didn't begin by making a statement to them about what they should believe. He asked them about their faith first. This helped Him to know where they were at. The question revealed whether Jesus should start with healing or instruction.

In *Matthew 20:32* (two blind men again): *"What do you want me to do for you?"* They cried out for help, but Jesus still asked them why they thought they needed mercy. He didn't assume the obvious but asked about their understanding of their need before He proceeded.

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

Think how helpful that information is. Sometimes people have reasons for believing they can't get better—that their condition is hopeless. They may even believe that their reasons have value, substance and logic; in fact, they may have told them to themselves for so long that they regard them as fact. Sometimes, however, people are so sick they don't want to get well. They may enjoy the sympathy, or their thinking may have become so fuzzy that they don't know what is best for them. A wise series of questions might reveal what is in the heart.

Therefore, a good counselor will try to uncover the reasons a hurting person might have for his situation before he begins to work toward a solution.

If we detect there is a genuine desire to get better, even though there may be some inaccuracies in the person's reasoning, then like Jesus we may press on in the conversation by continuing to ask questions and give counsel—John 5:1-14.

Here are a few kinds of questions that can be helpful.

Information: "Could you sum up what you think your need is?" This is a good starting point and helps the person to focus on the central issues—Matt. 20:32. If his answer doesn't give us the information we need, a follow-up question might be: "Could you tell me more about it...?" Or "Could you give me some more background—what led up to the events (problem) you have described?"

Reflection: Deeper in scope. "Thank you for being so honest and sharing with me. Let me see if I have heard you right. This is what I heard you say." Then repeat what you heard. Or ask: "Could you say it another way?" A counselor sometimes needs to serve as a mirror, giving back to the person the things he's heard him feeling, doing and pursuing. Sometimes the person we're talking to doesn't know what his words reveal, so we can help him hear what we heard him say. Be careful not to add your bias during the reflecting question. A good example of this type of question in Jesus' ministry is found in John 16:17-20.

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

Be careful, however, not to use the same phrases or questions over and over. That kind of repetition makes our helping words sound too canned. Here are a few of the many alternatives that Norm Wright suggests in his excellent book *Crisis Counseling*. (Here's Life Publishing, San Bernardino, CA 1985, pp. 45-46).

After the person has shared his problem or concern, we might reflect back what we heard by saying something like:

- "I'm kind of feeling..."
- "I'm picking up that..."
- "What I guess I'm hearing is..."
- "I wonder if you're feeling..."
- "You appear to be feeling..."
- "I sense that you are feeling..."
- "I gather..."
- "So as you see it..."

After you make this reflecting statement or question, it is appropriate to ask: "Did I hear you right?" This gives an opportunity to adjust what you said, or to agree with your assessment. He may then want to further clarify what he was saying.

Exploring: "Tell me how you felt when this happened to you." Sometimes we lose the capacity for reflection when we are in the middle of a problem, causing us to lose an accurate perspective. So a few well-chosen questions can get us to talk about what we're feeling and, more importantly, what we are thinking. This helps us to explore why we are doing something, as well as what we are doing, or need to do. So exploring questions are designed to reveal wrong motives or lies that have been believed; to uncover what may be hindering a person's spiritual growth or recovery; to help the person hear what is in his heart and determine if it is an accurate reflection of what he wants and what God wants; and finally, to help a person see the implication of his statements or problem.

So the exploring question is designed to get the person to focus deeper than on the surface emotion. For instance, sometimes a person says he is hurt when, in fact, he is angry (and vice versa) Therefore, a good counseling friend will draw a tentative inference from what he hears and test it on his friend. A few examples of exploring questions might be: (taken from *Crisis*

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

Counseling, *ibid.* page 46.)

- "It sounds as if... is that what is happening?"
- "I'm wondering, are you saying..."
- "Is it possible that..."
- "Would this fit..."
- "Do you suppose..."

PROJECT: John 21:15-19 is a great example of how Jesus explored what was in Peter's heart. Read this passage carefully and reflect on what kind of impact this interchange might have had on Peter. Why do you think Jesus asked Peter the same question three times? What did each answer give Him an opportunity to do? It appears these questions opened up the door for our Lord to give loving counsel.

Well, what if a person doesn't want to change his situation or ways? If he is determined to stay in his situation, all the counsel and insight we might give will not open him up to an answer. It's humbling to admit, but we must realize that just giving someone the right information doesn't always change his heart. Words themselves don't bring change. The Holy Spirit working through our words, plus the needy person's willingness to change, is what is needed. We may have to wait for awhile before we give any help, saying something like, "If you want to evaluate and challenge your beliefs and reasons for your situation, I would be happy to help you consider another alternative." From that point we are to pray, pray, pray.

PROJECT: Study 2 Timothy 2: 24-25: ". . . The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will."

What is our role as a counseling friend? God's role? What is the person who is "caught," called to do? (See Study, "Wounded and Captured Soldiers")

Even though Jesus effectively used questions, it wasn't all He did in a one-to-one helping conversation. In fact, with all their power, questions can be over- or misused. Sometimes an overabundance of questions can sound like interrogation. Asking good questions is a skill that should be developed by all people helpers, but some careful guidelines should be observed:

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

Know why you are using a question. Don't use them as fillers. We don't want to become "question boxes." Is it for information and reflection, or is it an exploration question? Gary Collins, in his book *People Helpers* (Vision House, 1976, p. 93) says: "This is perhaps the easiest trap to get into. Within five minutes from the start of an interview you can get into a question-answer routine and find yourself desperately trying to think of something else to ask in order to keep the interview going. The counselee, in turn, assumes that you will come up with a concise answer to the problem once you get all the information."

Be careful your questions aren't veiled ways to trap the person into saying something you can pounce on—Matt. 19:1-6; 22:15-22. Obviously, you should feel free to correct or instruct when the timing is right, but don't use a question as a veiled way to set a person up so you can give him a sermonette. A people helper's chief motive is not giving out right answers. The highest motive is to love the person into health and strength in Christ and His Kingdom—Mk. 12:28-34.

Do not predetermine what the answer is to be before you ask a question. Our questions should not be accusatory in nature—Matt. 13:53-58; 15:1-9.

Try not to ask questions that call for a yes or no response. That limits the length of the answer and the range of responses possible—Matt. 12:9-14 (see again 19:1-6)

Try to fashion your questions, when possible, so that they are open-ended. That can give the person a greater latitude to respond—Matt. 13:16-18.

Remember, questions aren't all that is involved in a healing conversation. For example, recently I had a conversation with a young man. He had done his homework and had a great series of questions to ask me. That wasn't all he had to say, though. The conversation included some dialogue, a lot of affirmation, and an attempt to understand me. I don't know if we totally succeeded in coming to a full understanding of each other's needs and point of view, but the conversation was a success because the questions and comments were designed to help me, not to nail me to the wall. I can take anything in that kind of interchange.

An effective counselor must also

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

be honest.

Proverbs 24:26: *"An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips."* There is no need to say a lot about this one. The need for honesty is obvious. At every point in the healing conversation, we should attempt to be as honest as we can without being brutal. (Also 28:23; 27:5)

openly share personal struggles (vulnerability)

Ecclesiastes 1:2: *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."* (Also 12:8)

2 Cor. 1:8-11 *"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many."*

What do you think this kind of vulnerability did for the apostle Paul's credibility? Oh, some types of people wouldn't talk with him because he wasn't stronger. These are typically people who need a guru, not a counselor. But most people would see him as very approachable, not someone to be feared.

What do the words from Ecclesiastes say to us about Solomon's vulnerability? The man who wrote the book of Proverbs turned from his own wisdom. Now toward the end of his life he looks back at his failure. Is his statement in 1:2 and 12:8 something we can hear and profit from? Yes, his vulnerability points us all to some valuable lessons. Even his failure, then, became a platform for wise counsel.

What should we do with the lessons we have learned from our lives? Some of us know what great failure is all about, too. My strong advice is to share the lessons we have learned, with

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

God's help, in such a way that our sin isn't glorified. We can turn our failures into lessons that point to the wisdom and power of God.

Vulnerability can be overdone. We can end up talking too much about our own lives, and fail to give adequate attention to the one we are trying to help. Use personal experiences wisely, don't let them dominate the conversation. Keep the focus on the one who is hurting.

A counselor must

be working toward a disciplined life.

Proverbs 10:17: *"He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray."*

The impact of a life shaped by the discipline of Biblical priorities and correction should be pretty obvious. It says loudly that we walk our talk, which shows others the way of life—10:17. So we need to ask ourselves: "How well do I heed discipline, and how disciplined is my life?" Remember, others are watching. Our friends and family members are being influenced for good or bad by the private world we keep.

be confronting, if need be—let others know when he thinks they are not telling all the truth.

Prov. 27:17—*"As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."* **28:23**—*"He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor than he who has a flattering tongue."*
Are we strong of character? Do we care enough to confront?

be one who prays.

Part Four: What are the qualities of the person who can help? (cont.)

Written by Bob Stone

James 5:16—*"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."*

The best help we can be to a friend may not be with short-term counsel, but long-term prayer. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. What more could we want? So, sometimes the best thing we can do when talking to a person who has great needs is to pray at the time the needs are disclosed, and then to continue to pray until there is an answer.

- Do you pray for wisdom? James 1: 5-8
- Do you have a prayer list?
- Do you have a way to systematically pray?

The final quality we want to mention in this study is that people helpers need to

guide others to discover their errors in thinking, or lies they have believed, using the Word of God—Proverbs 2:1-22.

Conclusion: How did you do? Did you see any areas where you need to improve? Take this week to re-read the material and note any areas that might need work. Then, give yourself some measurable way to work toward improvement. Also, complete each of the projects or studies noted throughout.