

Lately I have grown very discouraged over what we Christians call counseling. Right now there are more trained Christian counselors than in all of church history. And there are multitudes of "how to" books and relationship manuals available, offering spiritual advice on every subject, from marriage to physical fitness to child-rearing.

Yet, tragically, there are more troubled individuals, marriages and families in the church than ever before. The turmoil in Christian homes today is unspeakable - and, beloved, this ought not to be so.

Let me say up front, I am not against Christian counseling. Many people are responding to the counseling they're getting, and it's healing their lives, marriages and homes. Indeed, counseling has become a major ministry in the church of Jesus Christ. Almost every large congregation in America has at least one full-time counselor on staff. Here at Times Square Church, we use a number of counselors.

But I see more and more troubled Christians who don't respond at all to the counseling they receive. They may be ministered to for weeks, even months, with no results. A pastor or counselor can take them step by step through the scriptures, showing them the clear truth of God's Word. He can tell them, "Here is what God says about your problem. He says you're supposed to do this..." He confronts them with the reality that if they don't forsake their sin, they will incur God's judgment.

Yet none of this counsel registers. Why? There is a spiritual veil over these people's eyes. They have a terrible blindness to their own guilt and need to change.

Change me, O Lord

Many Christian families are at each other's throats, fighting bitterly. Some are actually suing each other, taking their relatives to court. Mothers are becoming estranged from daughters, fathers not talking to sons. They all claim to be lovers of Jesus - yet they're still holding onto anger, bitterness, ugliness. It's all chaos.

Since I began pastoring, I've been caught in the middle of many family feuds. And I can testify that few of these wars are ever resolved outside of supernatural intervention. Why? Everybody wants the other person to change.

One party tells me, "Why is he so stubborn? It's awful. He needs to change." Then I hear something similar from the other party: "How can she be so hard-hearted? She knows I'm doing the best I can. Is this what I get for being kind to her?"

It's always the other person's fault, the other one who needs to change. That's why I believe no amount of counseling will have an impact, until God's people resolve something. We all have to make this our sincere, daily prayer: "O God - change me."

We spend far too much time praying, "God, change my circumstances... change my co-workers, change my family situ-

ation... change the conditions in my life..." Yet we seldom pray this most important prayer: "Change me, Lord. The real trouble isn't my spouse, my sibling, my friend. I'm the one who stands in need of prayer."

God orchestrates the steps and lives of all of His children. He doesn't allow anything to happen to us merely by happenstance or fate. And that means He has allowed your crisis. What is He trying to tell you through it? He's saying you need to change.

Like it or not, we're all in the process of changing, in one way or another. In the spiritual realm, there is no such thing as mere existence; we're continually being changed, either for good or for bad. We're either becoming more like our Lord or more like the world, - either growing in Christ or backsliding.

So, are you becoming more sweet-spirited, like Jesus? Are you looking soberly in the mirror each day and praying, "Lord, I want to conform to your image in every area of my life"?

Or has your bitterness taken root, turning into rebellion and hardness of heart? Have you learned to shield yourself from the convicting Word of God and the voice of His Spirit? Are you spewing out things

now you once thought a Christian would never be capable of speaking? Are you hardening beyond change?

If this describes you, let me tell you plainly: You will never receive deliverance unless you change. Your life will only become more chaotic, and your situation will worsen. Stop building your case, pointing your finger, justifying yourself. God won't meet you until you wake up and admit, "Nothing is going to change for me, unless I'm changed."

Cry out to the Lord honestly in prayer: "Change me, O God. Dig deep in me - show me where I've failed and gone astray. Expose my pride, anger, stubbornness and sin. Help me to lay it all down."

How many more experts, counselors, lonely nights and fruitless strivings must you endure before you wake up to the truth? If any healing or restoration is going to take place, you have to take responsibility. Your miracle is dependent on your being changed.

If you desire to be changed, God's Word clearly shows two steps you must take. Heed this Word, and you will experience lasting change:

1. There Is a Veil Over Your Eyes, Blinding You - and It Must Be Removed.

Paul describes one change that must take place before any other change is possible:

"Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: and not as Moses, which put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: but their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which veil is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart.

"Nevertheless when he shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." (2.COR 3:12-18).

In this passage, Paul is talking primarily about the blindness of the Israelites concerning Jesus as the

Messiah. Yet He is also laying down a principle that applies to all people, Jew or Gentile. He's talking about blindness to biblical truth. Note verse 14: *"But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which veil is done away in Christ."*

Please understand, the people Paul wrote to were sincere. They faithfully studied the books of Moses, the law and prophets, the Psalms of David. They revered God's Word, teaching from it and quoting it freely. But there was still a veil over their eyes.

We think of a spiritual veil covering the eyes of Jews, Muslims and others, blinding them to the truth about Jesus. Yet there is also a veil blinding the eyes of many believers. They read God's clear warnings in scripture, they hear them preached with power - yet they're still not affected. In fact, they continue doing the very things they hear God's Word renounce. Consider these examples:

* Jesus Himself says, *"If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."* (MATT 6:14-15).

How much clearer can God be on this matter of forgiveness? Yet many Christians simply won't let go of their bitter, vengeful thoughts. They claim, "Oh, I've forgiven that person" - but their heart isn't in their words. And the Lord knows better.

Perhaps such a Christian has been mistreated or despitefully used by someone - his boss, his spouse, a co-worker, a friend. Now he thinks he's justified in holding onto his anger and unforgiveness. Yet scripture says if he allows even an ounce of unforgiveness in his heart, his sins will begin piling up against him.

Think of the horrible danger this Christian is in. Day after day his sins are mounting. His prayers aren't being heard. He's totally on his own, always in danger, his soul open to demonic powers. And when he stands before God at the judgment, every one of his sins will rise up and accuse him. Not one trespass will have been forgiven - because he wouldn't forgive others.

He'll hear the Lord say, "I warned you, called to you, spoke to you as plainly as I could - but you wouldn't listen. Instead, you held onto your unforgiveness. And now, I will not forgive you." That is the end result of spiritual blindness.

* *"For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away [divorce]..."* (MAL 2:16). Scripture states very clearly that God hates divorce. Yet many Christians today tell their pastor or friends, "I've prayed about divorcing my spouse, and God has told me it's okay."

No. God responds to this lie directly in the next verse: *"Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?"* (MAL 2:17).

The Lord is saying, in other words: "You go to church, praise me and put on a Christian smile. Yet you deal treacherously with your spouse - and you handle My Word deceitfully. I've told you I hate divorce, yet you go through with it. You even call it a good thing, saying I approve. But you're blind. You refuse to believe that I'm going to judge your disobedience."

Divorce among Christians today is as high as the rate among unbelievers. Tell me - is God's Word nothing but a joke? Can His warnings be cast aside as mere suggestions rather than commandments? No, never. There is a veil over the church's eyes. And God is warning us, "All the counseling in the world won't do you any good if you don't obey my commands. My Word has to become the very rule of your life."

(This is not to cast reproach on anyone who is already divorced. Divorce is unavoidable in certain situations, such as physical abuse, adultery or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse.)

* *"I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;"* (MATT 5:44). *"A soft answer turneth away wrath:"* (PROV 15:1). *"Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:"* (EPH 4:26).

A thousand counselors can tell you you've got a right to be angry, to feel resentment, to withhold for-

givenness. But in the end, their words simply don't count. God's Word is the final one. And if you don't fear it - if you aren't prepared to obey His commands in all matters - you have no hope of deliverance.

The Bible speaks loudly and clearly to all who would obey the Lord: "You cannot be changed if you remain willingly blind to God's Word."

2. The Veil Can Be Removed Only by "Turning" to the Lord.

Paul says that before our blindness can be removed, we have to turn to the Lord. *"Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away."* (2.COR 3:16). The Greek word for "turn" here means "to reverse course." In short, Paul is saying, "You have to admit that the course you're taking has brought you to emptiness, ruin, despair."

If your life is in some kind of turmoil - if something is terribly wrong, and things are deteriorating - you know you're going to have to change course. You may think, "It's my husband who's in a bad place. I'm waiting for him to change." Or, "My wife is headed for ruin unless she changes." Or, "My boss is all wrong. Something has to change in him."

We see so clearly others' mistakes and wrongdoings. Yet we're blind to our own need for change. We need a reality break - to admit to God, "It's me, Lord. I'm the one who needs to change. Please, Father, show me where I've gone wrong."

How can we change course? How can we turn to the Lord and have the veil removed? Here is the prescription Paul gives us for change:

1. Change is exclusively the work of the Holy Ghost. *"How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?"* (2.COR 3:8). We simply can't change ourselves. Only the Spirit of God can conform us to the glorious image of Christ. We've all heard it said, "When a person turns to the Lord, God lifts the veil from his eyes." That is solely the Spirit's work.

We also read, *"Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."* (2.COR 3:17). The word "liberty" here means "no longer a slave; exempt from liability; free, unchained." This describes the freedom that comes

with having our eyes opened. Suddenly, we see things in a new light. Only the Holy Spirit can break down our lifelong way of seeing things, turn us around and set us on a true course.

In short, the turning Paul speaks of here means trusting fully in God's Spirit. It also means turning away from all unbiblical counseling, all ideas and plans of your own, and calling on the Holy Ghost alone to lead and guide you.

Paul experienced this kind of turning. In Acts 9, when he was still known as Saul, he was on the wrong course. Talk about having a veil over his eyes - he was riding to Damascus to persecute the Christians there. Saul actually believed he was doing God a favor by arresting believers and throwing them in jail.

But the Lord intercepted this man and created a crisis in his life. When Jesus met Saul on the Damascus road, He struck him with a light that was so powerful it literally blinded him. Saul had to be led sightless to a house in Damascus, where he stayed until godly Ananias arrived. Ananias told him:

"...Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight..." (ACTS 9:17-18).

Saul surrendered his past, future, everything to the Holy Spirit - and the veil was immediately removed from his eyes.

2. Change also requires what Paul calls an open face. He writes, *"We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord..."* (2.COR 3:18). The root word for "open face" here has an amazing definition. It means being "totally committed to allowing God to expose every hidden thing in your heart - for the purpose of being delivered from it all."

This kind of open face cries out, "Try me, Lord - see if there is any wicked way in me. Show me where I'm living contrary to Your Word. I want to be delivered from everything that's unlike you. Away with all my pride, my ambitions, my selfish intellect, my reasoning. I know I can't think my way out of my situation. Holy Spirit, I need your

power and wisdom. I lay down every hope of solving things my own way."

For many believers, this is a very difficult thing to do. They have survived their whole Christian lives on their wits and wisdom. And now to have to admit to bungling things up and needing to give up control is just too hard.

The Lord had to strip me of my pride in this area years ago. Now, thank the Lord, I freely admit whenever I mess things up. My constant prayer is, "God, I do such dumb things. I make such awful mistakes, get myself into terrible messes. Please, Lord - clear them all up for me. I can't do it. Only you can." Thankfully, God delights in fixing our messes when we seek to do His will.

The glass Paul speaks of in this passage means mirror. And, beloved, our mirror is God's Word. It alone accurately reflects back to us our condition. Paul is telling us, "Go to the mirror of God's Truth, and behold your life. Tell the Lord you're on the wrong course, and you want to be changed. Ask His Spirit to humble you and to open up His Word to you. Forsake others advice, your own ideas, your own contrivances. Instead, turn to the Holy Ghost in full trust. Believe what He says to you."

If you will rely solely on the Holy Spirit, turning away from all other helps, He will unveil your eyes. He'll also send Holy Ghost led helpers into your life - and you'll begin to change in that very moment.

3. Paul concludes that we are changed into Christ-likeness little by little. This process doesn't simply happen overnight. It takes place slowly... step by step... as we seek Him and obey His Word: *"We ...are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."* (2.COR 3:18).

You may not feel it, but you're changing every time you open the scriptures and read His Word with an open heart, every time you get on your knees and make quality time for Him, every time you call on the Holy Spirit to guide and teach you. You may not think you're making any progress - but you are.

Paul Outlines Three Wonderful Evidences of Change Worked in Us by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit seeks to bring about these three wonderful changes in us:

1. The first change is a growing knowledge that God is going to be merciful to us all the way through our trial. *"Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not;"* (2.COR 4:1).

Here is the merciful ministry we have received from the Holy Spirit: He opens our eyes to the tender mercies of Christ toward us. He implants in us an inner knowing that the Lord is on our side, that He's for us. And He shows us how committed God is to keep us from falling - how compassionate He is toward everything we're going through, how touched He is by the feelings of our infirmities.

Right now you may feel abused and unloved. The devil would have you believe God has left you to your own devices - that you deserve to suffer, that it's all over for you, that there is no hope. Beloved, those are lies from hell. God wants more than anything else to rid you of your perverted concept of Him. He loves you tenderly - and He has already set a time to bestow all His mercies on you.

David cried pitifully as he was overwhelmed by his situation: *"My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread... I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top. Mine enemies reproach me all the day... I have... mingled my drink with weeping... My days are like a shadow that declineth..."* (PSALM 102:4,7-9,11). He groaned, "I'm in a terrible condition, physically, mentally and spiritually."

Yet that was the very time God had set to deliver David. And the Lord moved in quickly with mercy, help and comfort. David testified, *"Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favour her, yea, the set time, is come."* (PSALM 102:13).

God's set time to deliver David was in his lowest hour - when he was thinking, "I've been reduced to nothing." Likewise today, God has set a time to deliver and send His favor upon us - and it usually

comes in our worst hour of trial. That's the time when we're no longer struggling to do things on our own. Instead, we admit, "Lord, I can't do it - it's all a mess. I give it all over to you."

2. The second change that takes place is we're no longer plagued by thoughts of giving up: *"...as we have received mercy, we faint not;"* (2.COR 4:1).

God wants us to take our eyes off our circumstances and quit focusing on how bad things are. The truth is, our troubling circumstances may not end soon. In fact, they may get worse. And He knows if we focus on changing our situation, we'll only fall deeper into anxiety and depression. We'll grow weary and faint, giving up hope.

Yet as the Lord reveals His mercy to us, our fainting spells begin to disappear. Soon we have the growing assurance that God is at work in us. And nothing is more satisfying to our inner man than knowing, "God has His hand on me. I haven't arrived - but I know I'm going in the right direction. I'm moving toward the Lord."

Day by day, you'll become stronger in faith. He will plant His peace and rest in you. And you'll be lifted so far above your circumstances, nothing will be able to drag you down to despair again.

3. The third change to take place in us is a total renunciation of all hidden things and dishonesty. *"But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."* (2.COR 4:2). This means we no longer go to scripture to try to justify our sin. We don't seek out excuses to do wrong.

God wants our life to be an open book. Therefore, He longs to rid us of all hidden sin - all dishonesty, underhandedness, deception, lying, fraud. That's why the Holy Spirit searches out every thing in us that's unlike Christ. And if we truly want to change, we'll open ourselves up to His dealings.

You can forget about getting counseling, seeking self-help or restoring relationships until you experience God's change in each of these areas. Put everything on the back-burner until you're ready to renounce all your hidden sin.

When you've submitted to God's Word and the transforming power of His Spirit, you won't have to convince others you've changed. As you walk in His truth, the Holy Spirit will commend you to the consciences of everyone around you - *"...by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."*

The Greek word for "commending" here means "God's approval." Paul says, "You won't have to impress anybody that you've changed. God will move on their conscience, telling them inwardly, This person has my blessing and approval."

No argument can refute the inner evidence that God's Spirit has put in you. In fact, your change will either attract others or become a rebuke to them. The aura of Christ emanating from you will strike their very conscience. And that's when you'll find the power to influence others - through the changes taking place in you. You'll find relationships being restored. And you'll recover your spiritual authority in your home.

You'll no longer dwell on the changes that need to take place in others. Instead, you'll be so encouraged by the changes God is working in you, you'll realize, "Lord, I know everything is in Your hands. I resign myself to Your will. Just do in me what has to be done."

Now is the time to totally give over all your circumstances into His hands. Forget trying to be delivered out of your crisis. Instead, focus on God changing you and making you an overcomer. Stay in His Word. Call diligently on His Name. Trust the Holy Spirit. And make this the constant cry of your heart: "Change me, O God."

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