

Offer Advice Very Carefully

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Giving advice goes poorly so often, it is worth more careful thought about how we give it. We all need advice. We seek it every day. That is a wise and natural part of being a creature rather than the Creator. But we also know that advice can run from helpful to horrible, and it can bless a relationship or hurt it.

What is advice?

Advice is our opinion or our version of how Scripture should be applied in a given situation. It includes most anything that begins with an implied, “I think . . .” or “If I were you . . .” It is not offered with Scripture’s authority, so it is best followed with “and what do you think?”

The Apostle Paul makes a distinction in 1 Corinthians between what God says and Paul’s specific application of godly wisdom. We could say that one is truth and the other opinion or advice. “To the married I give this command [from the Lord]” (v.10) in contrast with “Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy” (v. 25). Of course, when Paul gives his opinion, we listen. But he knows he is speaking in a different way—he is giving advice. Some followed it, some did not, as he would expect.

Giving advice well

Good advice, at its best, comes only after someone has asked for it. It shows respect by listening carefully to the person’s question and asking what other advice the person has already received. It aims for give-and-take as it blends Scripture, the person’s strengths and weaknesses, the various circumstances of the moment, and humility. It prefers a consensus rather than a speech. And it follows up to see what path the person chose—love takes an interest.

Let’s say that a woman has been hurt by someone in the church and she asks what you think she should do. The relevant biblical category is love; that is clear. What she is hoping for is specific application of love in this situation. So we enter the category of advice. Does she go to the person? What might she say? Does she overlook the offense? The task is to exchange ideas on these and other questions—that is advice.

Giving advice poorly

Bad advice is a Christian art form. Here are a few examples. Notice that bad advice is dispensed quickly and casually.

- *You just need to trust God.* This advice sounds biblical, but the word “just” shows that it is tossed out as a platitude. The person might already be trusting God, it sounds superior—it is bad advice.
- *You need to forgive the person.* This too seems to be a biblical exhortation, but it does not have the humility to realize that there are other biblical themes about God’s compassion or his stand against injustice that might be more relevant. Better to say, “I think that we should talk about forgiving this person, but Scripture says a lot to us when we have been hurt. What do you think are God’s good words to you now?”
- *You need to tell your boss what is bothering you or take it to a superior.* This is bad advice because it never took the time to listen and recognize that the person was not asking for advice, but she was hoping to have a friend with whom she could share her struggles. This advice comes from the notorious “let me fix you and move on to someone else” school of advice.

My point is not that it is wrong to give advice. It is that in our haste and casual handling of Scripture, we confuse our advice with “God has said . . .” This can be disrespectful because we’ve offered a blanket statement without much thought to the particulars involved. Or maybe the person was not even seeking advice but only someone to listen. We need to be sure we know what the person is asking for before we start talking.

Advice and biblical counseling

I have seen, at times, that biblical counselors can become a Christian version of *Dear Abby* and aim for advice without being aware that there is that implicit “I think” to what is being offered. Instead, we can do better. We aim to engage a person in such a way that the person actually feels known, and then, in a joint enterprise, we consider (1) what God says (truth), recognizing that there is an interplay of many truths in Scripture, and (2) creative and suitable applications of what God says (opinion). Without love and humility, it can quickly veer off into advice given poorly.