

Identity and Story: A Counseling Transcript



By Paul David Tripp

When you counsel and disciple others, what vision motivates and directs you? If you had to capture, in a few words, what you are seeking to accomplish, what would you emphasize? What is it that you want the people God brings your way to get, know, and do? What sets your counsel apart from all the other kinds of counsel that the world has to offer?

It is very easy for counseling to atrophy to the size of people's perceived problems and felt needs. When we do this we reduce ourselves to situation and relationship mechanics. We dole out a series of practical directions on decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict-resolution, hoping that these things will get this person up and running again. Yet, personal ministry, counseling, and discipleship must have a grander goal. Ministry aims for more than solving people's problems in hopes that this will make them happy and functional once more.

What is wrong with the life-mechanic agenda for counseling? Two things make it deficient. First, God wants to do more than just enter the story of the counselee as the facilitator to make everything work out. God's has redemptive work embeds our story in His story. He does not want us to be happy simply because somehow, someway *our* story is working, but

because *His* story is. It is possible to counsel a person in such a way that even though changes take place, "self" remains at the center and the person's highest allegiance is to the success of his own plans.

Counseling cannot be reduced to giving people sets of directions. This is because problems are not just information based; they are allegiance based. So, the problems that bring people our way provide a sovereignly appointed opportunity to embed this person's story in the larger story of redemption. In this moment of struggle and ministry, God is giving us an opportunity to get at issues of functional allegiance: the problems underneath the horizontal problems that bring people our way. In the final analysis true biblical personal ministry is always about the allegiance of the heart. It always calls me away from my devoted allegiance to my self-defined world, to find my hope, comfort, and purpose in God's presence, plan, and will.

Second, not only does God want more for us, we need more. Counseling and discipleship are intended to deal with what is wrong with people. The people who come our way suffer from something deeper than functional ineffectiveness and inefficiency. Peter diagnosed what is wrong very well: people are "ineffective and unproductive" because they are missing essential qualities of Christian character. They are missing these because they are "near sighted

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and blind and have forgotten that they have been cleansed from their past sins" (2 Peter 1:8, 9). In other words, people come to us with deep problems in the areas of *identity* and *imagination*.

Most of the people that come to us for help are suffering from some kind of identity amnesia. They have simply forgotten who they are. They have forgotten that they are sinners. The people we counsel tend to be very skilled at underestimating the presence and power of indwelling sin. They seem often unaware that they carry around inside of them their own personal Judas who will betray God again and again. They seem unaware that a spiritual war for the heart rages in every situation and relationship in human life. They go blind to the fact that as sinners they tend to exchange functional worship of God for an endless catalog of creation-bound God-replacements. But people who understand what sin is about, quit thinking that their greatest life problem exists somewhere outside of themselves. What's wrong can't be resolved by some new skills or change of venue! And when they do understand this, they begin to hunger for internal change, instead of crying for some external fix.

People also forget who they are in Christ. Sadly, people who have known the Lord for many years often still lug around a problem-based or a performance-based identity. Peter says, "They have forgotten that they have been cleansed from their past sins." They have forgotten the magnificent resources of grace that are theirs because Emmanuel has come and made them the place where He dwells. They tend to forget how rich and well supplied they are for the battles that they will face as sinners in a fallen world. They have forgotten that they need the grace of Christ every day for what they will face today, just as they needed that grace the first day that they believed. So, in their forgetfulness they let themselves be defined by their problems and identified by their performance.

But this blindness is not just in the area of identity. It also occurs in the area of imagination. By imagination, I don't mean the ability to conjure up what is unreal. I mean the ability to see what is real, but unseen. One of

the profound problems with people we counsel is that they do not see God. They look at their lives and only see problems, failure, brokenness, and difficulty. They just do not see God. If, as God's child, you are able to look at your life and not see the hand of God, you are a person in deep trouble. Everything you do and say is shaped by what you—or don't see. Again and again, I am reminded, as I sit with people who have little hope and blinded imaginations, that I am called by God, not only to help them to do what is right and loving, but also to help them see how the living Redeemer is active in their lives. One of the most powerful ways to help counselees see God, is to incarnate his presence, grace, and love in your relationship with them. In so doing, you are in reality making the invisible Christ visible to people who desperately need to see him.

My zeal for these truths shapes the counseling encounter described in this article. Frank and Gina are a young married couple. In many ways, they have a sturdy love. They have been through much together and have a strong commitment to each other and a strong affection for each other. However, their commitment has been tested again and again by Frank's struggle with heroin addiction. They have lived through the typical moments of high hope and devastating disappointment that characterize a struggle with substance abuse.

It is now a full year since I first began meeting with Frank and Gina to work on their relationship issues. Within a few months, Frank fell back into an addiction lifestyle and quit coming to our sessions. Gina continued coming alone.

When I realized Frank was coming to this session with Gina, I decided to focus on three things.

1. I wanted to hear his story in a bit of detail. The only way I can help them make sense out of the details of their story is if I also know those details. Then I can speak into their lives with the wisdom of the Word, and embed their actual story in the larger story of redemption.

2. I wanted to know how Frank and Gina were relating to one another in the middle of their trouble. Were they encouraging faith and hope in one another? Were they angry and

defensive? Were they arguing over little things to the detriment of big things?

3. I wanted most of all for them to be able to look at the mess of their lives and see God, so they could begin to clean up the mess.

After some initial greetings, Frank and Gina began laying out all the things that were on their plate. They gave quite a list: financial problems, the question of whether Frank should live for a while in a halfway house, the question of Methadone treatments, the possibility of jail-time or probation, the question of whether they would have to move, the need for legal advice, the issue of the impact of all of this on their children. I listened for cues as to how they were doing as a couple in the middle of all these overwhelming pressures.

The following three vignettes give an example of what I was after. I've chosen vignettes of my interventions, moments where I do most of the talking. But, in each case they arose from prior interactions (omitted from this transcript). Also, in each case my intervention is limited to significant movements in Frank's and Gina's thinking: the acknowledgment of anger, the experience of despair, the commitment to see God and stand together.

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Frank: I sat down and went over the bills and decided what needed to be paid. What needed to be done. We also decided... I decided... to go back on Methadone to get back on my feet. I just decided that over the period of the last six months of me struggling, I haven't really gone anywhere. If I get back on the Methadone and totally turn it over to the doctors and turn it over to the Lord, then things can work out. I'll be able to get back on my feet. Be able to get back working. Get to a halfway house. Get some sobriety time. Yeah, have the Methadone as a crutch. Then come off Methadone...that's the only way that I am going to be able to do it.

Paul: Using the methadone as a bridge to where you want to be.

Frank: I struggle way to hard...to do it without the Methadone. I struggle way to hard. Way

too hard. I can barely even...can't even live. All I am is depressed. I cry. I use. I try to stay sober, but I can't do it.

Gina: I still think that a program is the best way. But he just has it in his head that he can't do it no matter what. So, again, I say, "Do it the way you feel want to do it." He's not living at the half-way house anyway. He's gotta get sober before he lives there.

Paul: Let me back you up a little bit. As you guys have been meeting, what have those times been like? What have you been talking about?

Gina: We usually meet at the park with the kids and we talk while we are swinging them or they are playing. Or we go to Burger King. We meet there and sit down. Normal talk. I kinda tell him how the week has been going. Different things are happening with Tina, my daughter. Last meeting, we just sat down and went over the bills. I tell him how I stand. Looks like I gonna need to look for some type of job. But I don't want to leave the kids full time. Just going over the bills. We talk about his kind of plan to start to tackle them. What his plan is to try and get sober. I guess that just the beginning cause we can't really talk about too much beyond that.

Paul: And you guys are OK in those talks?

Frank: Do you mean have we been fighting? Arguing? Talking? Well. A little...One day we were arguing a little bit, but not...

Gina: Yeah, I got mad one day because he started getting angry at my family.

Frank: Anger. I have a lot of anger

This is what I am looking to uncover. Frank and Gina have a lot on their plate. They have many decisions to make, but I know that what has and will get them into trouble once again is not the external pressures that are on them, but the way they tend to bite and devour one another in the middle of these pressures. Frank is angry and Gina is quite frustrated and overwhelmed. Their

anger and frustration has the potential to blow any practical counsel right out the window. It is very tempting to jump in and give them a program for responding to all the pressures that they face, but unless I deal with the heart that they are bringing to these pressures, any program for change is sure to fail.

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In this next segment of conversation, we went carefully over the details of the issues they were facing and the decisions that they needed to make. All the while, I was looking for an opportunity to help these two overwhelmed people to see themselves accurately, but more importantly, to see God. After scanning the issues facing them, I jumped in.

Paul: Let's go way back when I was first talking to you guys last year. You were doing pretty well. We were thinking it was pretty great that we didn't have to deal with the drug stuff...we could deal with the dynamics of your relationship. But then something happened. And I never had a chance to ask you this question, because it has been difficult since then. What went wrong? Where was the turn? Here is a couple heading down the right track, then all of sudden, all hell broke loose.

Frank: Lot of things happened. Probation was off my tail. I wasn't... I probably needed to be more serious with what was going on...with that sponsor...I wasn't contacting him. Being a heroin addict, it is almost like being constantly hungry. That craving is always there. I don't know exactly what happened. I know probation got off my tail. And once that happened, I used, and once I used, I was off and running. Once I picked back up that first time...I was off and running.

Paul: You're saying you let down your guard. When you did that, you didn't benefit from all the accountability that has really helped you. One of the things that has touched my heart in this problem, Frank, is that God has surrounded you with tremendous resources. There people

at church that really care for you. There are programs available to you. You know, I told you, that I have signed on for the duration in this one. I really do care for you.

God has really surrounded you with wonderful resources, resources that you don't want to be threatened by, but you want to take advantage of. Lot of resources that other people in your struggle don't have. What those resources say is that "God is in your life. God cares about you. God has not given up on Frank. God just hasn't. He hasn't shed the blood of His Son for us so that...."

(Frank begins to sob)

Paul: He doesn't shed his blood of His son just to lose you. He's fighting for you.

Frank: (sobbing) I have done so wrong. My family. I have done so wrong. I feel so bad.

Notice that in the context of getting Frank to talk about his own sin and struggle, I am able to help him to see the amazing grace of God is not only a promise to him, but also a living visible reality in his life right at this moment. God has surrounded Frank with wonderful resources of help, strength, and encouragement. All of those resources point to the fact that God is present and active in his life. Here, I am helping Frank to see redemptive realities that give him a whole new way of thinking about himself and responding to his struggle. Frank needs to see these realities. He forgets and goes blind.

Notice too, that when Frank begins to see the presence, goodness, and grace of God, he immediately begins to confess his sin. I am persuaded that a vision of the faithful love and mercy of God draws sinners out of the darkness of hiding behind excuse, denial, and blame in a way that the law is powerless to do. Frank knows using heroin is wrong and destructive. He knows being sober is right and constructive. But only God's real goodness brings everything to life!

Paul: Listen, Frank. That's why the cross. If you and I were capable of being righteous in ourselves, Jesus would not have had to die. The fact that God was willing to kill his son demonstrates how desperate our condition is. Look, I am exactly like you... Drugs aren't my issue. But there are things in my life that I am just as enslaved to and apart from God's grace, there is no hope for me either. And I always say in situations like this, and I think, if I give up hope on you, then I have to give up hope on me. Because, we are the same kind of people.

This is equally important for Frank to hear. It is tempting for a drug addict to think that he is different from others, that somehow his struggles falls outside of the circle of God's grace. So, it is important that I number myself with Frank: (1 Cor. 10:12f) that he understands that sin, by its very nature is addicting. We all get ourselves hopelessly hooked and the only hope for any of us is the rescuing work of the Messiah.

(Frank begins sobbing again.)

Paul: That's why what God has to offer you is so important. You and I don't have the strength inside ourselves. We just don't.

Frank: I am suffering so much. It's like God wants me to suffer.

Paul: Well, My thinking about this is that God loves you enough that he is willing to let you see how bad the other side is (the side with drug addiction)... because he doesn't want it to be attractive to you.

I am reinterpreting the data here in a way that is more biblical and God centered. It is not that God has abandoned Frank and so now he is suffering. Rather, God is pursuing Frank and is willing to let Frank taste the consequences of his choices in order to win his heart.

Frank: I know. I know. But my wife, my whole

family have had to suffer with me. I put them through so much.

Paul: Frank, I have seen the grace of God so operating in Gina. In faith, courage, and wisdom. She has not been alone. God has been with her. It is so important that you don't run from God, but that you run to Him. Because it is the only place of hope. This last six months has demonstrated that you are not going to make it on your own.

Frank: Yeah, I know.

How dangerous it is for Frank to be standing in the middle of the chaos and consequences and be willing in even the smallest way to question the presence and goodness of the Lord. It is vitally important that Frank run toward the Lord in every way possible.

Notice how hard it is for Frank to look at his life and see God. When he looks, all he sees are huge problems, discouraging consequences, scary decisions, and his own weakness and sin. Notice how hard it is for him to hold onto hope and how quickly he moves back towards despair.

Paul: Again, God's grace is in your life. He is surrounding you with resources... because he loves you. He shed the blood of His son for you, not to lose you. He is fighting for your soul. I think you and Gina have talked about something insightful. There is a lot of anger inside you. And I do believe that part of God delivering you from drugs, a big part of that is delivering you from anger. In ways you don't understand, it drives you and sends you in that other direction. And beginning to get a hold of that...I have thought that at times maybe it would be helpful if just you and I meet and just talk about your anger. Where's it from? And what do we do with that? How can we ask God's help to have that anger be something that is in the past. Because it is such a significant issue.

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After the above conversation, our talk again moved to the practical decisions that Frank and Gina needed to make. The most important for him was whether he would enter a halfway house for a few months and the most important for her was whether she could continue to live where she was or find another place to stay. We discussed both issues in detail. As we did, it became very clear that Gina is a planner. She feels most comfortable when her plans are in place and seem to be working. She was struggling with the things they were facing and the uncertainty of it all. I wanted her to see that her hope could not be based on her ability to conceive and pull off her plan. Like Frank, she had to find her hope in the Lord. No matter what she was going to face, no matter how chaotic it would be, God would give her all that she needed to face what she was called to face. That is why I said the following.

Paul: I believe you are serious about moving in God's direction. God is going to provide for you. You have heard me say that if he puts the Red Sea in front of you, he's gonna give you the ability to swim, build a bridge, send a boat, or part the waters. And he's gonna do whatever is necessary to get you across. Even here, the fact that we are still able to meet in counseling sessions...is God saying "I am not going to abandon you. I am not going to leave you to yourself. I love you and will provide what you need."

What is the clear picture over the past year is that sin is powerful and sin is enslaving...we are all a bunch of addicts...whether I am addicted to anger or acceptance of other people, or clothes, or food...we are just a bunch of addicts. That's why we need the power of God in our lives and that's why we gotta be where that power is available. ...I actually think you want to stay tender...you don't want to let yourself get hard-hearted...and you want to confess just how big your need is.

Frank: What do you mean by that?

Frank's question provides an opportunity for me to be much more concrete and specific with him about the nature of his own heart struggle and the grace that God has provided for it.

Paul: Just that...you are an independent guy. And I don't think that, in itself, is a bad thing. But right now it is a dangerous thing. You need to say, I need to let go of that independence because I need help right now. And again, Praise God, there are people around you that really do love you and want to be part of your move in another direction.

I would be so excited that we could continue week-by-week doing what we are doing today and begin to see these progressive steps of change take place. And I think that is possible.

And look, not to minimize anything, but if our Lord could create the heaven and earth and hold it together, he's not gonna wring his hands and say "What are we gonna do with our Frank?"

He has the power to give you the things you need.

Again, the main thing I want to accomplish in this moment with this enslaved and discouraged man and his fearful wife is to help them see and grab hold of the presence, activity, and grace of God. I am deeply persuaded that they will not continue to do what is right in the midst of hardship and temptation unless they are convinced that He is with them and will supply them with everything they need.

Paul: (To Gina) Are you planning to be in the courtroom on Monday?

Gina: I haven't been able to make baby sitter arrangements yet. But I was planning on it.

Frank: You were?

Paul: If I were a judge, your presence in the courtroom would be important to me. And if you two were doing OK with each other...getting along. Your presence, Gina,

makes the judge think that this guy has some things in place that will help him make it. I think it would be very important to be there. I think, again, as long as Frank is committed to the right direction, you want to stand with him.

Gina: Yes. I do.

Paul: But I have said this before...It is critical, critical, that you guys get along with each other. You want to make that a priority. It is real clear to me when anger and conflict happens between you two, it doesn't help you at all. It's when you guys are standing together....

Now, can I sit between you? I want to draw something for you. I want to give you something to hang on your refrigerator.

Gina: Frank needs a copy for his car.

Frank: Yeah, for my rear view mirror.

Paul: Let me make a contrast. (Draws a stick figure with curly hair.) Guess who this is?

Gina: That's me.

Paul: I'm pretty good at drawing! You don't know what this picture is...this is you just when you got out of bed this morning. You are looking in the mirror and you are saying, "Oh boy".

I draw Gina, angry, and with her hands on her hips waiting for Frank to get his act together. Next, I draw a second stick figure with short hair to represent Frank. Last, I draw something black and ugly that stands between them.

This second figure is Frank. This black and ugly thing is the drug problem. It would be real easy for you, Gina, to stand here with your hands on hips and say, "You get your act together, and when you do, you can come back home." That feels real righteous...but that is unrighteous. Think about it. If God had done that to me, I'd be dammed. The amazing thing about the gospel is that God actually sent His son to earth. He makes Him live life like we do. And suffer a horrible death. He comes to us. Isn't that amazing? That doesn't mean that you

compromise...it doesn't mean you are willing to do what is wrong.

Now, I point out the contrast in the way that God responds to our weakness and sin in a second picture. In this second picture, Frank and Gina stand together and fight the scourge of drugs in unity and cooperation. The two pictures present a visible picture of the humility, unity, love, willingness to sacrifice, commitment to forgive, and patient hope that God gives to us and calls us to offer one another. The picture allow me to trace out specifically what these attitudes will look like in the context of the relationship to one another and the struggles that surround them.

Paul: This model (picture number two) actually seems right. Here's what has to happen....

This is you, Gina. And here's Frank... you stand together and look at this thing called "drugs." You want to do everything you can as a couple..

Here (in picture 1) there is a fight going on between you. You are fighting each other.

Here (in picture 2) the fight is with this thing called "drugs".

Now, God says he's there when his people stand together. When two or three people stand together. That's why if you guys are going to do this, there are going be a lot of temptations in front of you. Frank is going to have a bad day and you will be ripping mad at him. Maybe He is being independent or mad or rude. It will be a real temptation to respond in anger and fling these words at him: "Hey, remember, you are on probation here...you are lucky you are even allowed in this house at all." This gives the devil a real opportunity.

So, there has to be this commitment to keep this thing working the way it's supposed to...long before this becomes an issue, the devil is gonna try to get into this. If he can do that...you start feeling angry...you start carrying that anger around....and you are already weakened toward temptation. It is real important that you defend your relationship that you don't let anger and bitterness creep in. Frank, there will be times when you think Gina

is being way too hard on you. You will think: "Who do you think you are? You are not in charge of my life. I am a man. Don't tell me what to do." Boom. You are just heading for trouble. You are heading for trouble.

It is so important that you always use this second model-that you stand and fight the drugs together.

Then I turn to each of them and make pointed personal application.

Paul: Gina, this is your husband. Do everything you can do to help him fight this battle... to stand by him.

Frank, this is your wife, as she lives through something that is really hard to live through.

You know how helpless it is when your husband is out on the streets and you can't do anything about it.

Frank: I can't even imagine. I can't even imagine.

Paul: And you wonder, "Where is he now? Where will he be tonight? Is he alive or dead?" It is very, very hard. So, there are important ways that you need to be patient with one another. This struggle is hard to go through. There will be moments that it's not only hard to deal with the drugs; it will be hard to deal with the person in order to deal with drugs.

Do you have any questions or comments?

I am doing my best here to get each of them to examine and understand the struggle of the other and to be committed, in God's power, to stand together.

Gina: No. I completely agree. Like I was trying to tell Frank. I already see. I just gotta push out anything negative about my father or my family, especially if anybody says anything malicious or demeaning about Frank. Anger towards them and what they say will put me in a bad place. And I'm not even a drug addict. Anger would put me in a very bad place. I have really been trying to concentrate. I don't want to hear what

they have to say about Frank, and that's about it. I'll pray for those people. But I want to stay away from their soap opera life and their anger and their attempts to bring everybody down. My family could kick me out of the house, and I'm not going to be angry with them. I am not going to go there. I don't want to be there.

Paul: Anger is like a cancer. It eats you up.

Gina: I don't want to be there. God has been taking care of me. I didn't think I would be living there this long. I haven't had to ask for help. I am taken care of. I look in my refrigerator, and I've got food. I don't know what it will be like in a month, but right now, I've got food. After what you have been saying for the past couple of weeks, I just think it is important to be there and I want Frank to see that it is important too.

Gina recounts how God has been faithful in providing for her. Why does she do this at the end of our time together? She does it because someone has come alongside of her and given her eyes to see. This fearful and overwhelmed woman now looks at her life in a different way. She looks and sees the hand of God. She looks and see concrete evidence of his presence and provision and because of this she has new courage and hope.

Paul: Let me pray.

Lord, we really are amazed at you. Amazed that even though we blow it terribly, you are still faithful and you still provide wonderful resources of grace for us. It is so amazing. Lord, I pray for Frank, that he will love you more than anything else in this world. That in ways that he hasn't in the past few months, he will find hope in you. That he would believe that you have the power to deliver him. Lord I pray that you would give him special grace for moments of anger, moments of independence.

Lord, I pray for Gina. It's hard to be a witness to this stuff. It's hard not to give way to hopelessness and fear, or anger and self-

righteousness. I pray that Frank and Gina will be able to stand together and fight this thing together. We commit the court session on Monday to your hands. The Bible says the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord and that you move it wherever you will. We pray that what is done on Monday will be best for Frank and Gina, regardless of the outcome. I pray that the outcome will be part of a larger plan to restore Frank, to restore this family, to provide ultimate victory and deliverance. Thank you. In Jesus name.

My prayer at the end is a summary of the perspectives that I laid out during the session. Know yourselves. See your Lord. Stand together in a unified trust in Him.

That afternoon, I didn't spend a lot of time telling Frank and Gina what to do.

It is a bit silly to give directions to blind men. My goal was to get them to see, and as they begin to see, to give them a whole new way of thinking about how to do battle with the things they face. With a different identity and imagination, they live differently. They will treat each other with love and honesty, not anger and deceit. Counselors are more than mechanics trying to adjust situations and relationships. We are the ambassadors of our Savior King. Our calling is to point to His presence and incarnate His grace, and in so doing, not only to give people hope, but to give them a whole new agenda for living. God calls us to connect people to Him. His presence, power, and rule, make every principle and promise of Scripture reliable.