

Facing Our Mistakes in Counseling and Growing in Wisdom

Michael Gembola | CCEF National Conference 2022

- I. Why our mistakes stay with us
 - A. The story of Jack¹
 - B. Reflection: what counseling mistakes trouble me?

- II. How to prevent and respond to key errors
 - A. Failure to **love**
 1. Summary: moral/ethical failure is first a failure to love rightly, in ways guided by biblical wisdom and with actions guided by moral clarity.

 2. Examples:
 - a) Even wise Solomon fails
 - b) The counselor with a messiah complex

Westminster Larger Catechism Answer 130: “The sins of superiors are, besides the neglect of the duties required of them, an inordinate seeking of themselves, their own glory, ease, profit, or pleasure.”

3. How to prevent it
 - a) Invest in wise screening practices²
 - b) Notice warning signs in yourself (1 Tim 4:16)

 4. How to respond
 - a) Affirm the truth of the forgiveness of sins
 - b) Do not give or protect positions that require trust when trust has been profoundly broken

 - B. Failure to **know**
 1. Summary: Some errors involve an inaccurate or incomplete conceptualization, and are typically failures to do all we can to humbly learn to know people and problems rightly.

 2. Examples:
 - a) Autism spectrum
 - b) Messy marital conflict

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

²Michael Gembola, “Three Recent Books on Narcissism and Spiritual Abuse in Church Leadership,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 35:3 (2021): 61–92.

3. How to prevent:
 - a) Humility in taking necessary time and thoroughness in assessment
 - b) Humility in continuing to learn from others
 - (1) But isn't the Scripture sufficient?³
 - (2) The value of supervision, consultation, and mentoring
4. How to respond: the path of humility [Humility to revise your understanding]

C. Failure to **speak and do**

1. Summary: sometimes our actions have an effect contrary to what was intended; whether as unwise in themselves or as misapplications of otherwise good principles that bring harm.
2. Examples
 - a) Trying to out-argue anxiety
 - b) The counseling professor's error of weakness
 - c) Mishandling complex situations
 - d) Job's friends: truth misapplied
3. How to prevent
 - a) Smaller-scale helps: tasks
 - (1) Pay attention to people dropping out of counseling early, and address themes you discover⁴
 - (2) Debrief mistakes and seek out those with expertise

Proverbs 1: 24 I called you so often, but you wouldn't come. I reached out to you, but you paid no attention. 25 You ignored my advice and rejected the correction I offered. 29 For they hated knowledge and chose not to fear the Lord. 30 They rejected my advice and paid no attention when I corrected them.

- b) Larger-scale helps: perspective changes
 - (1) There is wisdom in accepting both sensible and insensible suffering (See themes in Ecclesiastes and Job especially)

³ Todd Stryd, "God's Providence and Human Agency in Counseling," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 33:3 (2019).

⁴ Joshua K. Swift and Roger P. Greenberg, *Premature Termination in Psychotherapy: Strategies for Engaging Clients and Improving Outcomes*, (APA, 2014).

- (a) Sensible suffering: you reap what you sow
- (b) Insensible suffering: you don't reap what you sow
 - (i) Job's life experience: You can do the right thing and things can still go very poorly.
 - (ii) Job's friends' experience: You can share what you thought would be helpful and still be off-base or cause harm.
- (2) Although God often works in surprising ways, there is wisdom in accepting varying roles, varying levels of expertise, and varying levels of spiritual maturity (Titus 2, 1 Cor 1:25-27)

c) How to respond: repair the relationship

III. How imperfect helpers get help

A. Living faithfully through uncertainty

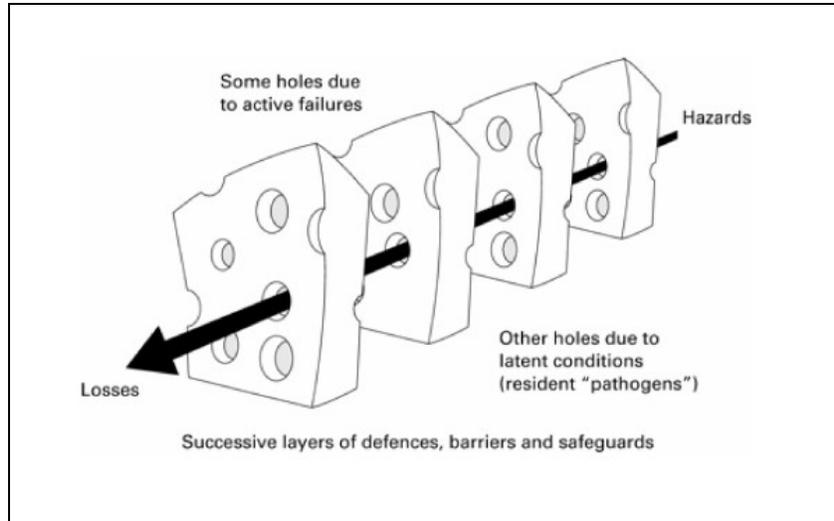
1. To trust God and serve people requires some risk.
2. We carry different levels of responsibility for bad outcomes (Exod 21:28-29), but we are bound up in Christ and with one another (Rom 12:5, 14:7-8).

B. Living faithfully through shame

1. Learning from the "swiss cheese" model: appreciate system failures in addition to individual failures.⁵

J. Reason's Swiss Cheese Model

⁵Thomas V. Perneger "The Swiss cheese model of safety incidents: are there holes in the metaphor?" *BMC Health Services Research* 5:71 (2005).



2. Finding the counter-intuitive answer to shame: share your regrets with God and others.⁶

Ray Ortlund: Biblical confession also includes a horizontal dimension – confession to one another, where we find powerful healing. Confession to God alone often does not lift us into the freedom we desire. With God alone, confession can be too easy. It is too easy to save face, and there is no healing, no release, in saving face, however earnest the confession to God might seem to be. Confession to God alone can be a way of not really facing ourselves and our sins. James 5:16 shows us where freedom can be found: “Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”⁷

Ray Ortlund: "What I miss [when I do not confess sins to others] is felt forgiveness and healing. But the price I pay for that is the embarrassment and losing face"⁸

C. Praying in hope as those who live with regret.

1. Revisiting *Home*: “What can I say? You’re my brother.”
2. “A Liturgy for One Responsible for an Accidental Death”⁹

⁶ Atul Gawande, *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science* (Picador, 2003).

⁷ Ray Ortlund, "Confession," The Gospel Coalition (September 10, 2013).

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/confession/>

⁸ Ray Ortlund and Sam Allberry, “Staying Honest, Showing Honor,” *You’re Not Crazy* (August 30, 2021).

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/youre-not-crazy/staying-honest-showing-honor/>

⁹ Douglas Kaine McElvey, *Every Moment Holy Volume II: Death, Grief, and Hope* (Rabbit Room Press, 2021), 213-217.

“Shape me by this humbling sorrow, Father,
Not into one forever crippled by guilt, but into one who, receiving great mercy,
Now offers great mercy, receiving forgiveness,
Now offers forgiveness, receiving amazing grace,
Now extends that gift of grace to others.”