Are you someone who seeks to help others with their personal and interpersonal problems? If so, you ought to ask yourself these self-evaluative questions about the counseling you do:

Do you ever discuss the reality that every one of us, every day, is up against a supremely subtle enemy? Do you ever introduce the Liar, Tempter, Accuser, and Murderer into the conversation? Do you ever press the issue of the Evil One’s relevance and significance to a person’s life struggles?

The reality of spiritual warfare should come up in your counseling conversations. If it never does, then you are not noticing and facing the complex reality in which you and your counselees live. Every person you counsel—like you—is living in a fog of war, stalked by a deadly predator, and facing a master of deception. For good, biblical, and practical reasons, Christians have always understood that we face a three-fold moral enemy: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Someone else’s desires and purposes are also at work when our hearts deceive us and our culture misleads us.

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Counselors tend to be very interested in accounting for the interplay of describable things: psychological dynamics, social influences, and physiological givens. But the devil? How does the uncanny power of darkness fit in with the more accessible factors in a person’s life? And are those seemingly accessible factors actually far more elusive than we imagine, because they work hand in hand with the weaver of illusions and delusions?

So are you reckoning that every person you counsel is facing a supremely subtle enemy?

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If you already do reckon with the activity of the devil, what “devil” are you describing? If you do bring the arch-evildoer into your conversations, you need to ask further self-evaluative questions:

Does the way that you speak of the Evil One portray him as a wild card, disconnected from normal personal and situational problems? For example, do you make him the “lead actor,” bringing him in too early and too often, as if Satan’s activity is the deepest and most significant explanation for everything that goes bad? Or do you bring him in as a “devil of the gaps,” an extra factor, applicable only when a problem seems particularly complex, bizarre, and confusing?

The Bible never makes the Evil One the primary actor. And Scripture does not bring him in only when something unusually strange or evil is going on. The real devil is utterly normal and his role is fully integrated into daily life. Mundane evil is the devil’s business.

The devil plays an underlying, behind-the-scenes role in the everyday problems of sin, misery, and death. The apostle John discusses the interplay of flesh, world, and devil throughout his first letter. Then he sums up the problem in one pithy sentence: “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). John is not being spooky or seeing a devil behind every bush. Human life is defined by the struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, true and false, life and death. The devil sums up all that is dark, evil, false, and deadly.
Similarly, the apostle Paul discusses the same interplay of evils throughout his writing, and most pointedly in Ephesians 2:1–3.

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Are you accurately describing the devil who operates within the turbulent mix of things that determine how we live?

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If you agree that we should not ignore Satan’s operations, and if you agree that we should not exaggerate his activity, then you naturally ask several more questions.

What does it look like to counsel with a conscious recognition of the Evil One? What does it look like to recognize that we are also encountering the devil when we struggle with wayward desires and cultural falsehoods?

The Liar and Murderer are not the focus of ministry. People are the focus. So, speak of the devil, but don’t talk too much. Center your attention on human beings as conflicted moral responders. Speak to the human heart. Let what you say be true to human life in its complexities. The way you pay attention to Satan is analogous to how you pay attention to other influencing factors: bodily problems, personal history, cultural and peer influences, situational stressors and sufferings. They are in the mix, but the person as a moral responder always comes front and center.

That’s how Ephesians, 1 John, and the rest of Scripture approach us. That’s how Jesus approaches us. Consider the people you counsel through the same eyes that Jesus considers them. Take your cues from the most perceptive, caring, wise, and effective counselor who ever lived. He recognizes that the Evil One plays a consequential role in forming the