

RECEIVING GOD'S COUNSEL

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As lawyers, we are trained to give counsel to other people. We spend a lot of our time each day giving counsel to others. We have a need to receive counsel ourselves. We are often so busy counseling others that we sometimes don't take enough time to receive counsel for our own lives. First and foremost, we need to receive counsel from God. We need His guidance if we are to fulfill His highest purposes for our lives. We need Him to show us the best path for our lives.

I have needed God's counsel regarding my decisions to marry and have children. Then, as a woman lawyer trying to juggle my career with my faith, my marriage and my motherhood, I have found myself constantly seeking God's on-going counsel! Lots of prayer, waiting on God and seeking the counsel of others have accompanied each change in my life. I started some time ago to compile a list of verses dealing with the subject of God's guidance. After 20 years of practicing law, 20 years of marriage and 18 years of motherhood, please allow me to share a few of the principles I learned along the way that have immensely helped my journey.

God's Promise to Guide Us

First, we need to be fully persuaded that God does indeed counsel us. He does have a plan for us. He wants to guide us.

King David wrote about this many times in the Psalms. Let me share a few of my favourite Psalms that assure us that God wants to counsel us. In Psalm 16:7¹, David wrote: "I will praise the Lord who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me." (Who hasn't woken up in the middle of the night and received some inspiration as to how to solve a problem!) In Psalm 23, David described the Lord as the "Shepherd" who guided Him. In Psalm 25:12, David wrote: "Who is the person who fears the Lord? The Lord will instruct them in the way chosen for them." In Psalm 32:8, God promises: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you." In Psalm 48:14, David proclaimed: "For this God is our God forever and ever. He will be our guide, even to the end." In Psalm 119:105 we find David's famous declaration: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path..."

King Solomon echoes this same theme in Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 3:5 states: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight." Other translations read "He will direct your path."

The prophets wrote about God's counsel to us. I love the verse from Isaiah 30:21 which states: "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'" Later, in Isaiah 48:17, the prophet wrote: "I am the Lord Your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way that you should go..."

Jeremiah 6:16 tells us to "stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths; ask where the good way is and walk in it..."

The next time you read the books of Kings and Chronicles, note that often the success of a particular King and the destiny of the nation of Israel under his watch depended on whether the King "inquired of" the Lord. King David was one of the Kings who often "inquired of" the Lord.

In the New Testament, Jesus Himself promised many times to show us the way. In fact, He said that He *is* the way. In John 8:12, He said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life..." Just before He left this earth, Jesus

¹ All verses in the NIV translation

promised to give each of us His Holy Spirit. In John 14, Jesus said: “And I will ask the Father and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever.” It is so wonderful to recognize that we have a Counselor who can help us with each and every decision we make.

God has a Plan and a Purpose for Each One of Us

God has a unique plan and purpose for each one of us. David wrote in Psalm 138:8: “The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me.” In Jeremiah 29:11, we find: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper and not to harm, plans to give you hope and a future.”

God knows in advance what good works He wants us to do in our lives. (Ephesians 2:10) He has already ordained each day of our lives (Psalm 139:16). We need to daily find out what our divine appointments, divine tasks, divine projects and even our divine interruptions are.

God Uses Various Means to Counsel Us

God often uses more than one way of counseling us, especially if the issue is important, such as whether to seriously date someone, whether or not to marry them, if and when to have children, if and when to switch jobs or whether to move. I have heard over the years that we should think of each instance of guidance as a red light (stop!), a green light (proceed through the intersection!) or a yellow light (proceed with caution or wait until the guidance becomes clearer). I have found this tool very helpful as I have sought God’s counsel. With important issues, we should consider each of the following means of God’s guidance and discern whether, overall, the light is red, green or yellow.

(a) His Word

In Psalm 119 we saw that the Word was, to David, a light for his path and a lamp for his feet. The Bible is the main way that God guides us, both generally and specifically. Generally, the Bible is full of truth and principles that show us the way to lead a wise life. In addition, however, God will sometimes use a particular verse on a particular day to guide an individual. Have you had the experience of reading a verse one day that seems to really speak to your immediate situation? If you want to be serious about seeking God’s counsel, then you need to be serious about getting to know His Word.

During my years as a litigation lawyer, I never dared show up in court without reading every word in the legal briefs that my opponents had served on me. I would try to know those briefs backwards and forwards. One day it dawned on me that I should seek to know God’s Word with the same diligence and thoroughness. What excuse do we have to do less? If you take anything away from this article today, take away a desire and a conviction to know the Word even better.

We ought to pray every day and then to be very mindful of what we are reading in our devotions in the following days. We spend too much time talking *to* God about our lives and not nearly enough time listening to what *He* has to say about our lives!

I sympathize with young lawyers who struggle to work mega hours whether they want to or not. I remember during my years of early practice that my devotional life was poor and inconsistent and was usually kick-started from time to time by some fresh crisis. After reading so much all day long, the last thing I wanted to do was read my Bible. God sometimes humoured me by speaking to me when I cracked open my dusty Bible at a random page, but this is not the way mature Christians are meant to be guided.

Some one close to me suggested one day that I try the “five and five”. This means getting into the habit of praying for at least five minutes every day and then reading the Bible for five minutes. He challenged my sincerity as a committed Christian if I could not do this even on my busiest days. Of course, the ten minutes of devotional grew into longer times, especially when I saw how God gave back that time to me later in the day. I would sometimes tell myself first thing in the morning that I could not really afford to spend devotional time that morning because of the insane day ahead of me, but I would do it anyways, and arrive at the office to discover that a long meeting had been

cancelled or postponed or an offer to settle a pending three week trial had arrived just as we were on our way to the courtroom door. I remember once arriving at work to find out that the 94 year old witness I was supposed to question that day had died during the night. One way or another God honours all of the time that we “tithes” to Him! Spending time in prayer and Bible study does not make our lives harder. It makes them easier.

(b) His Spirit

As earlier mentioned, Jesus described the Holy Spirit as our Counselor. How does the Holy Spirit guide us? There are many ways, but two of the most frequent are as follows.

Sometimes we get a noticeable impression—a strong sense to either do or not do something. When we try to ignore it, that strong impression deep inside does not go away. It does not go away until we do something about it. If we ignore it, we sometimes find out later why we had such a strong compulsion to phone someone or to not go someplace. We need to learn to listen more carefully to those persistent impressions that won’t go away.

The other main way that the Holy Spirit guides us is by the presence or absence of certain attributes of the Spirit in us. The main attribute we most commonly encounter in this regard is the attribute of peace. In Scripture, peace is described as one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5). We ought not to do something unless we have full peace about it. If you don’t have peace, wait!!! Wisdom from above is always full of peace. If you feel unease, discomfort, turmoil, confusion or anxiety about taking a particular step, recognize these as red (or at least yellow) lights.

Similarly we should consider whether the prospect of taking a particular step fills us with joy...inspires us with faith... is motivated by love...draws on our courage...accords with wisdom...generates boldness or generosity or compassion. These attributes of the Spirit working in us are good signs that we are probably on the right path. On the other hand, if our decision seems prompted by worry, anger, pride, revenge, etc then we can be pretty certain that we are not being led by the Spirit. This awareness of what is going on with our thoughts and emotions as we process a decision is part of what it means to be “led by the Spirit”.

It has been my experience that when God wants us to do something, He usually provides the *inclination*, the *motivation* and the *inspiration*. If we feel really excited and motivated and passionate about something good, then we are likely moving in the right direction. On the other hand, if we are dragging our heels and feel pressured into saying “yes” to something we have no desire to do, then we need to see this as a “yellow light”.

It should be pointed out that sometimes we feel hesitation or discomfort when God is trying to push us out of our comfort zone. We usually know when this is the case, however, because God is persistent and will use many of the ways of guiding us to make it clear to us that we need to do something notwithstanding our discomfort.

We have to be very careful about relying *only* on being led by the Spirit, especially in the early years of our Christian walk or when the decision-making process involves intense emotions. But paying attention to what the Spirit is trying to tell us “in our gut” is nonetheless an amazing dimension of God’s counsel to us that is often overlooked.

(c) Other people

We are meant to seek counsel from one another. It is wonderful to have a mentor. We should cultivate mature Christian friends. Proverbs 27:17 tell us that “as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” Proverbs 15:22 states: “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”

Seek out Christian family members, Christian friends and Christian colleagues and get their counsel, especially if the decision is major. How blessed you are if you have a Christian spouse or Christian parents.

How do you know when someone else's counsel is what you should listen to? Often it is just a matter of recognizing the wisdom in someone's advice. Jesus said "my sheep know my voice". We learn to recognize God's voice even when it comes through human lips. Of course, we can also test advice from others by seeing if it lines up with Scripture, stirs up the attributes of the Spirit in us, accords with circumstances etc.

(d) Circumstances

Proverbs 16:9 states: "In his heart, a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps." Despite our best laid plans, God is in ultimate control of our circumstances. Similarly Proverbs 19:21 tells us: "Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." In Isaiah 22:22, we read: "What He opens no one can shut and what He shuts no one can open."

If something is God's will, circumstances will *eventually* have to line up. Sometimes we need faith, patience and perseverance to deal with obstacles or opposition in our way, but eventually the circumstances have to line up with what we think is God's counsel. If they don't, we have to re-evaluate what we think we heard from God. A classic example is the situation where a person believes it is God's will to marry someone else. What if the other person does not think so? What if they marry someone else? Whatever verse we think we have been relying on, whatever advice someone else gave us, at a certain point we need to recognize the "shut doors" in our lives, let go and move on. We all make mistakes in hearing God's guidance, especially where intense emotions and desires are involved!

I also suggest that you become sensitive to unusual circumstances in your life. Pay attention to circumstances that are out of the ordinary.

Finally, we can sometimes *ask* God to speak to us through circumstances. There is of course the well-known example of putting out a fleece like Gideon. There is the example in Genesis of the servant of Abraham who was sent to seek a wife for Isaac. The servant prayed that he would know the right woman when she offered to water his camels. We should not be lazy to always use this method but there is Biblical precedent for it and God especially seems to honour it when time is of the essence for a particular decision.

(e) Wisdom, Discernment, Good Judgment

In Proverbs we are promised over and over that we *will* obtain wisdom, understanding, discernment, sound judgment, and common sense if we earnestly seek these qualities and revere God. In fact, just reading the whole book of Proverbs fills us with a generous amount of wisdom and understanding!

If we are faithfully reading the Bible, seeking the Holy Spirit and learning to discern His presence, seeking the counsel of mature Christians and ultimately seeking the counsel of God Himself in our daily lives, then over the years as Christians we will build an enormous reservoir of wisdom, understanding, discernment, sound judgment and common sense. We cannot agonize over each of the thousands of small daily decisions we must make. We can learn, especially as we deal with this multitude of more minor decisions, to rely on our innate wisdom and judgment that we have developed if we have immersed ourselves in God's principles and truths. 1 Corinthians 2:16 promises us that we will have the "mind of Christ" if we follow Him.

I pray that God will richly guide you and counsel you and lead you into His very highest and best purposes for your life!

Karen practiced as a civil litigator with Blaney McMurtry in Toronto for 20 years. She left her practice at the end of 2001 and has been busy with volunteer commitments such as advocacy projects with World Vision, facilitating Alpha groups, participating in an executive outreach in Ecuador, speaking, mentoring etc. She lives with her husband, Sam, a medical doctor, and two children near King City, Ontario. □