

Idolatry:

“I am more prone to listen to therapeutic advice than spiritual advice, say, from a pastor.”

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Lesson One: Does this advice advance my comfort, happiness, and fulfillment?

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Setting Our Sights

What is most important in life? How do I decide this? In this lesson we will examine everyday advice which promotes comfort, happiness, and fulfillment above all, identifying its key characteristics. With this knowledge we will then express the definition of this kind of advice in our own words. We will examine portions of God's Word to identify where this "me" oriented advice is present and compare it with God's counsel. Finally, you'll be encouraged to share what you have learned with others.

Getting Started

All people employ advice. Some advice we seek out and some we simply absorb. We seek out and absorb advice on commonly shared aspects of life: marriage and family, job and career, finances, politics, and health, among others. There are also various places from which we derive advice. Such as, family, friends, therapists and doctors, social media, books, and politicians. Some advice is healthy, while other counsel is not. How are we to know the difference?

1. Read through the statements below. What do they all have in common? Circle the words in each statement which express this common idea. Express this idea in your own words. Below each statement, write down the error in thinking.

- It's best to choose friends who can help me find fulfillment in life.
- I will share my opinions and feelings in whatever way is necessary to get my point across.
- One day I will be president of this company, and no one will get in my way.

- God wants me to be happy. So, I will give to church and charities after I pay off my house.
- If my marriage gets in the way of my happiness, it's okay for me to divorce.
- Helping others is fine, but finally, life is about me and meeting my goals.

Digging In

1. Read Luke 12:13-21, the Parable of the Rich Fool.

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." 14 But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." 16 And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, 17 and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' 18 And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" 20 But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

- a. What did the brother want Jesus to do? Jewish law dictated that the older brother would receive a double share. Notice that he was willing to strain his relationship with his brother to obtain his portion of the inheritance. What does this say about his priorities?
- b. What did the rich man value in life? How do you know? Eventually the rich man died and all that he had accumulated passed to another. In what way was the rich man a slave to his worldly goods? Which of today's advertising slogans was the man living out? To what extent are you a slave to your earthly goods?
- c. What does Jesus mean by "rich toward God?"

2. Read the following verses from Matthew 5:1-12, The Sermon on the Mount.

3 *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

5 *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

6 *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

7 *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

9 *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

The sinful heart seeks advice towards reaching one’s own comfort, happiness, and fulfillment above all else. What do these verses from Matthew 5 say about that? Discuss with a partner and record your answers below.

Example Response: Where I often have a proud spirit which puts itself above the needs of others, Jesus calls us to be poor in spirit.

While the Lord doesn’t want His children to be miserable, He does call us to live with a spirit of humility, seeking first and foremost the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and as a result, the good of others. This often involves extending mercy and seeking peace.

Hitting Home

While the world and our own sinful nature lead us to listen to self-seeking device, the Lord’s counsel is to find our comfort, happiness, and fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

1. Recall the account of the Wise Men in Matthew 2: 1-12, who followed a star from the east seeking the king of Jews, Jesus Christ. They found Jesus and bowed down to Him, offering precious gifts. King Herod tried to use the Wise Men to locate the child to murder Him. Finally, the Wise Men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but to go home by another route.

- a. The Wise Men from the east were well educated, and likely had wealth and prestige. Yet, they traveled to Jerusalem and eventually to Bethlehem to find the king of the Jews, who is Jesus Christ. What does this suggest about the value they placed on finding this king, as compared to that of their material goods and success? How did they show that they honored Jesus above themselves?
- b. On the other hand, King Herod was threatened by this king of the Jews. We know this because he sought to find the king, not to worship him, but rather to kill Him, as we learned later in the chapter, when Herod ordered that all male children below two years old be put to death. Eventually, Herod would pass away, and all his wealth and power passed to another. What does this teach us about the final value of the comfort, happiness, and fulfillment of earthly things?
- c. The Wise Men came to recognize a Treasure above all others. This King of the Jews, Jesus Christ, is our greatest treasure, one that will last forever. Not only is Jesus eternal, but His gifts are everlasting, ones that He richly pours out onto us. Namely, His love and Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sins, and everlasting life. What comfort does it bring to know that Jesus and His gifts are unchanging in a world that is ever changing?

2. Read Philippians 2:3-8

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

- a. Paul admonishes us to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.” How does listening to advice that promotes my own fulfillment reflect selfish ambition and conceit? With a partner, compose a list of ways in which selfish ambition and conceit could create problems in relationships and the workplace.
- b. How is Jesus the exact opposite of selfish ambition and conceit? Underline the words and phrases which describe Jesus as a servant.
- c. Paul explains that to consider others more significant than ourselves and to look to the interest of others is a gift we receive in Jesus Christ. Only the Lord’s Holy Spirit can change the heart. The Holy Spirit can also teach us to make changes in our own lives. Make a list of areas in your life in which you seek your

own comfort, happiness, and fulfillment above all else. Examples might include marriage, family and friends, work, financial well-being, even at church. Where are you hearing the message that true fulfillment is to be found in this earthly life? Consider books and magazines, family and friends, or television.

d. Recognizing that bad advice can take us down a dark road of disappointment and frustration, the key is to limit our exposure to those sources of sinful counsel, and instead to embrace God's Word. Consider changes you could make in your life to limit exposure to advice which promotes fulfillment in this earthly life above all else, and increase time spent in the Bible. Record your ideas below. Share them with the group.

Wrapping Up

Prayer is an excellent way to review what you have learned in Bible study. Using the prompts below, pray with your partner or with the entire group.

- Praise the Lord for His servant heart with which He put our needs first, emptied Himself, took on human flesh, and humbled Himself even to the point of death on a cross.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal in His Word areas in your life in which you have rejected the counsel of the Lord in favor of advice which promotes your own comfort, happiness, and fulfillment in this earthly life.
- Thank the Lord for His unchanging love and gifts: the Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sins, and everlasting life.
- Ask that by the Holy Spirit the Lord would turn your heart from the empty search for fulfillment in this earthly life, and instead toward the comfort, joy, and peace which God gives in Jesus Christ.

The Extra Mile

In the course of your weekly activities, share two things you have learned in this class with two people.

Helps for the Leader

Lesson One: Does this advice advance my comfort, happiness, and fulfillment?

❖ Getting Started

(About three minutes.) Be sure to start on time out of respect to those who arrived promptly, and to complete the content of the lesson. Before beginning, make sure you have a few Bibles and writing utensils for those who may have forgotten to bring these items. As they arrive, welcome participants into the learning space with a friendly smile and give each person a copy of the study. Take a few moments to have each participant introduce themselves and share something fun. For example, his or her favorite ice cream or last vacation.

Ask a student to read the introductory portion under “Setting Our Sights. Participants will have varying comfort levels with reading out loud. Without forcing, encourage every participant to read at least once during the lesson.

(About six minutes.) Move the group immediately to the exercise under “Getting Started.” Invite students to read each statement aloud one by one. Allow two or three participants to speculate regarding the commonality of the six statements. The commonality is that they exemplify the attitude that seeking one’s own comfort, happiness, and fulfillment above all is the highest good in life. State this if none of the participants reach this conclusion on his or her own. If time allows have participants write down the error in thinking below each statement and then share. If time is short, assign one statement to each participant. Below is a possible response to each statement.

- Helping others is fine, but finally life is about me and meeting my goals. (The Lord calls us to care for the needs of others.)
- It’s best to choose friends who can help you find fulfillment in life. (Friends are not to be used as tools.)
- If my marriage gets in the way of my happiness, it’s okay for me to divorce. (The Lord teaches that marriage is for life.)

- I will share my opinions and feelings in whatever way is necessary to get my point across. (The Bible teaches that we use words to build one another up.)
- One day I will be president of this company, and no one will get in my way. (We are to do nothing out of selfish ambition.)
- God wants me to be happy. So, I will give to church and charities after I pay off my house. (God’s highest goal is that we have forgiveness and everlasting life.)

The goal here is to help participants see how the idolatry of fulfillment finds its way into our speech, and that they may have similar thoughts themselves. Offer the responses in parenthesis only if participants have trouble. Finally, read the paragraph below to the participants.

All the statements above reflect a prevalent attitude in our society today. This is the notion that life is primarily about me, in particular my comfort, happiness, and fulfillment. The attitude doesn’t seek to hurt others, but will only promote the good of others after the needs of self have been met. People all over the world live life with this mindset. If we are honest, each of us struggles with this. This is because it is part of our sinful nature. We are inclined to put ourselves first, even before God. As a result, we are prone to seek out and listen to advice which encourages us to pursue our own life goals first, whether it comes from a counselor, book, self-help program, family member, friends, or even a pastor.

❖ Digging in

(About three minutes.) Have one participant read Luke 12:13-21, or go around the circle having each student read one verse at a time. Moving to portion “a,” lead students to see that the brother wanted Jesus to have the other brother divide the inheritance. Students should understand that the brother was willing to strain his relationship with his brother to have half the inheritance.

(About three minutes.) Continuing to “b,” the rich man valued his goods more than anything else. We know this because he builds bigger ones to house his possessions. The man was a slave to his worldly goods because he valued and found fulfillment in them to such an extent that he took no concern for death and

his existence afterward. If students struggle to come up with slogans the man might be living out, encourage them to think of commercials on television, the radio, or the internet. Invite students to share thoughts regarding his or her own slavery to earthly goods.

(About two minutes.) Looking to portion “c,” lead students to understand that being rich toward God is having forgiveness of sins and everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ. Affirm any answers which resemble this idea.

(About eight minutes.) 2. Invite one or more participants to read the verses from Matthew 5. The goal of this activity is to help participants recognize that seeking comfort, happiness, and fulfillment above all is sinful. What is more, the world and the sinful heart seek advice that encourages this sinful behavior. Students are to understand that God’s Word doesn’t teach this attitude. In fact, God’s design is vastly different. If students are struggling to reach answers as to why the verses from Matthew 5 teach the opposite, share these ideas.

- ❖ The Lord loves a broken spirit and a contrite heart.
- ❖ We are not to have a proud, haughty spirit.
- ❖ God’s kingdom is to be valued above all else.
- ❖ We are to extend mercy, and the Lord extended it to us in Jesus.
- ❖ We can seek peace with others in the reconciliation with God that Jesus earned for us.

Invite a participant to read the summarizing paragraph.

❖ **Hitting Home**

(About two minutes.) The overarching goal of this section is to lead participants to the conclusion that listening to God’s advice is infinitely better than advice that encourages fulfillment in this world above all else. In exploring section “a,” students should conclude that the Wise Men valued the King of the Jews far more than their own wealth, education, and prestige. The Wise Men showed their honor for Jesus by traveling to see him, bowing down, and offering costly gifts.

(About two minutes.) Moving immediately to portion “b,” stress the attitude of King Herod in contrast to that of the Wise Men. Where the Wise Men placed Jesus first, Herod loved his wealth and power such that he was willing to kill untold numbers of children to protect them. Regarding the final value of comfort, happiness, and fulfillment in earthly things, appropriate answers might include spouse, children, and friends will not last forever; material goods can be stolen or lost; education and career fulfills only in the short term. Invite participants to share answers.

(About two minutes.) Portion “c” stresses the contrasting eternal value of Jesus and His gifts, in particular that they are unchanging. Invite participants to share answers. For the question at the end of this portion, lead students to answers such as: I know that Jesus will never leave me; God will never take back His forgiveness; even though I grow old and die, I live forever in heaven.

(About three minutes.) 2. Invite one or more students to read Philippians 2:3-8. The overarching goal in this section is that participants would see in Jesus the rejection of fulfillment in this earthly life, and instead the exemplification of servanthood in His life, crucifixion, and resurrection.

(About three minutes) a. Help participants to understand that listening to advice which promotes earthly fulfillment above all else is by its nature selfish. When I am consumed with my own plans and desires, I am not mindful of the needs of others. Conceit tempts me to believe that my desires are more important than those of anyone else. Ways in which selfish ambition and conceit can create problems in relationships and the workplace include neglecting the needs of friends, using family members to reach goals, or shirking responsibilities at work in favor of pursuing one’s desires.

(About two minutes.) b. Jesus set aside His glory to come into the world in human flesh with a spirit of humility. He sought to meet our needs by living a perfect life in our place, dying on the cross for our sins, and rising from the dead to declare victory over sin, death, and the power of the Devil.

(About three minutes.) c. If participants struggle to answer the questions in this section, redirect them to the examples given. If time allows, invite participants to share their responses.

(About three minutes.) d. In case students have difficulty coming up with changes, offer the following. Limit time spent with friends who lead me away from God’s Word; Take part in a Bible study; Examine closely what I take in via the radio,

television, or reading to determine if I am receiving godly advice; Step away from social media groups which advise me to pursue comfort, happiness, and fulfillment at all costs.

❖ **Wrapping Up**

Survey the group to determine if they would prefer praying in pairs or a group. Remind them the Lord gladly attends to the prayers of His children no matter how short, simple, or broken they are. If participants are not comfortable praying from the prompts alone, encourage them to write down things they would like to say before praying.

❖ **The Extra Mile**

Remind participants that they can find people with whom they can share what they have learned in their marriage, family, workplace, clubs, or sports activities, among others.