

# From the Other Side of the Couch

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A BIBLICAL COUNSELOR'S GUIDE TO  
RELATIONAL LIVING

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# Hello!

Welcome to my counseling office, let me know if I can get you a glass of water or cup of coffee. I'll sit in my forest green arm chair next to the lamp stand with photos of my son. You can curl up on the couch across from me. If you're cold, go ahead and grab the afghan my aunt Goldie made to cover your lap. Now let's talk.

Clients have asked me for years to write a book that sounds like the conversations we have in my office every day. This is not your typical self-help book with tips and tools to help you manage difficult situations. I do a little bit of that, but mainly I focus on principles. Every counseling session focuses on how transforming your heart, mind, and character leads to healing and happiness. In this book you will read a lot about viewpoint, because that makes a difference in getting clarity and seeing truth. We live in a complicated world and the enemy loves to use confusion and doubt to deceive. I strive to sit in God's living room looking at life through his vantage point and sharing that perspective with clients.

Every client that walks into my office and every person who picks up this book is looking for hope. Hope that change is possible this time, wondering if they are too broken to be fixed. What I can tell you is that I absolutely, positively, completely believe in God's heart for you and your healing -- because I now know His heart for me. God loves you with the same passion I experience. The process I share shows you how to identify and wrestle with the barriers that keep you from receiving and experiencing that same truth. I invite you to be open to the concepts I share and have lots of discussions with God about them. Whether you agree or disagree with me is not as important as what you gain in the conversation process.

I've structured the book as if we're talking in my office. First, I'll introduce myself. I expect that you, like me, are very particular about who you allow to speak into your life. Every counselor has their own views on how relationship dysfunction happens and how to address it. This view is based on their training and personal experiences. It's important for clients to decide if the counselor's framework is the best vehicle to get them where they want to go. For that reason, I purposefully share my background and the key life experiences that form my beliefs. I've done my best to be transparent, allowing you to get a feel for my heart, character, and motives.

Second, I'll explain the general principles I rely on related to beliefs, feelings, thoughts, actions, etc. Principles such as learning what it means to love ourselves and others in a godly way, why we need to go back and open

up old painful scars, and how learning new skills such as grieving can draw us closer to God and each other. After discussing the foundational principles, I'll introduce a counseling model I developed called the Roadmap to Freedom. Walking out this journey takes you from a place of woundedness to a life lived out of joy. Each chapter moves you step by step along in the process. I've made this journey myself and am honored to walk alongside to guide and encourage you.

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## Outcome-Based Model

One of the most detrimental counterfeits to the Relational system is the Outcome-based model. It promises a direct correlation between working hard and reaching goals. If I work 18 hours a day, 7 days a week, the Outcome-based formula tells me I will receive all the benefits of the "American Dream." On its surface, striving to reach goals and benchmarks appears to be helpful and motivating. That's why this model is enticing. It's much more convenient to independently meet our own needs without relying on God! The "health and wealth" theology uses this same formulaic approach. If I pray and believe hard enough that God wants me to be blessed in specific ways, then God has no choice but to make it happen.

In the Relational model, each person invests in helping one another grow and prosper in loving God, themselves, and others. The Outcome-based model preys on the fear that our legitimate needs will not be met and offers a counterfeit solution to a manufactured problem. Just look at how products are marketed. Instead of focusing on the qualities of a product and letting the consumer decide what they need, commercials appeal to our emotional vulnerabilities. We're told there's a direct correlation between wanting to be loved, accepted, admired, etc. and a particular product. As I looked closer at this model, I began asking probing questions.

Where did these formulaic equations come from? Who's actually benefiting from me agreeing with them? Do they lead me closer to God or farther away?

What I uncovered was how humankind distorted the godly principle of relational leadership. We replaced it with a system that could be used to manipulate and control for selfish gain.

God's leadership style is repeated throughout the Davidic Psalms: "*His love endures forever.*" Leadership without sacrificial love eventually

becomes self-centered and punitive. The Bible shows how exasperating and difficult it was for God to lead households and nations of stiff-necked, stubborn, immature people. Trying to lead when you're immature in loving relationally is exhausting and potentially tempting.

Humankind decided to create a shortcut and instituted their own leadership model. Most Outcome-based leaders tell us what goals are godly and institute a set of rules and standards designed to reach those self-determined one-size-fits-all goals. In this model, there's always a set of negative consequences for broken rules or unmet goals.

God gave us the Ten Commandments to show humankind the futility of using rules to replace relationship. What God wants most is for us to draw near to Him so He can draw near to us. Jesus cried over Jerusalem like a mother hen cries over her missing baby chicks. Our worth and value can only be understood through our soul connecting with our creator. When human leadership creates a general set of standards, it leads us away from God's heart and we lose our personhood.

Outcome-based systems connect value and worth directly to achievements. In many homes, schools, churches, small groups, etc., you must follow the rules or meet specified goals in order to receive approval and be recognized as valuable, competent, or good. Not living up to those expectations means letting people down, an unthinkable sin.

You can see this system play out from the first day a child attends school and is asked to measure up on a standardized test. Who decides what facts and theorems are necessary for a student to be "successful" in life? In church and family households, often there are rigid rules to follow and mandated behavior and belief expectations that must be followed. Oftentimes when the system is questioned, the answer given is "because I said so" or the questioner is scolded because their actions reflect badly on the institution or family name. At work, there are sales goals, productivity expectations, time limits, etc., all of which dictate the employee's worth to the company.

I'm not taking issue with setting up systems to encourage people to grow individually and contribute to the community. The Bible talks a lot about having a vision and pressing onward to run the race well. But when humankind use their own standards to judge worth and value, we are putting ourselves in the place of God.

There can be an internal and external tug-of-war when we're conditioned from childhood to connect our character, worth, and value to pleasing someone or meeting goals set by someone else. If an authority figure we respect uses guilt and shame to ensure compliance, we get a warped view of what God expects from us. When Adam and Eve chose independence

over relationship with God, humankind learned how to deeply hurt each other. Rather than focusing on ways to support, encourage, and care, people became objects to use and manipulate for personal gain.

God's leadership centers on modeling servant leadership, sacrifice, and unconditional love. The God of the Old Testament was angered, disappointed, and saddened by each human generation who didn't respond to this type of leadership. God wanted them to see how he personally cared for them and understood their needs.

The Israelites looked around, saw every other nation had a human king, and asked God to appoint a king over them. In 1 Samuel 8, God warns Israel through Samuel that a king would draft sons into the military and use their land and energy to supply the military with food and weapons. Their daughters would be expected to take care of the military, people would become slaves, and everyone would be required to give a tenth of their crops and animals to the king. Samuel begged them to consider the cost of Outcome-based leadership, but the Israelites were adamant.

*But the people refused to listen to Samuel. 'No!' they said. 'We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.'* (1 Samuel 8:19-20 NIV)

All of history shows God's words to be true. Humans have created hierarchical systems based on power, control, and authority which have generally been used to provide a framework for the strong to make others conform to their wishes. It also provides a rationalization to weigh the value of an individual against survival of the system, usually languaged in some magnanimous way. We've all heard mottos like, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of a few." In the world's system, there must always be a choice. The saddest thing of all is that most of us believe there's no other way to live. But when we view life within a relational context, God gives both sides an opportunity to learn, grow, and mature. No one ends up on the losing end unless they choose, like the Israelites, to tell God no. Even in that instance, God had a plan to bring them to repentance.

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### Cost of Living in an Outcome-Based System

Another one of my favorite movies is *The Matrix* because it beautifully portrays this tug-of-war. Its basic premise is that the world known by most humans is actually a simulation created by living machines to manipulate and control humanity for their own benefit. Computer hacker Neo begins to find and question computer anomalies and he's recruited by a band of truth-

seekers. The most important scene in the movie is when Morpheus tells Neo he has the choice to open his eyes to the simulation. Morpheus warns Neo if he chooses to see the truth, he cannot go back to ignorance. Such an immense decision reveals Neo's character. Does he want to shut his eyes to seeing the world in bondage and continue to do what is best for him or is he motivated by truth, even if it means personal hardship and fighting against oppression?

Neo chooses to take the truthful red pill and when he wakes up, he finds himself attached to an electrical machine by an elaborate cable system. This is what reality looked like for those humans who were enslaved in the dream simulation. Reality was not as pretty as the dream world, but embracing it showed strength and integrity. Neo makes it his life's work to help the Zion brotherhood bring truth to the world. The movie shows another man named Cyber who decides he's tired of living in reality and schemes to return to the matrix so he can live a comfortable, pretend lifestyle. Like Judas, Cyber betrays the Zion brotherhood to the enemy machines for his own benefit.

The price for embracing the Outcome-based system is a life of fear and despair. Life is a never-ending worry cycle that you won't measure up. Every day you work feverishly to reach a goal set by someone else and when you do, you work even harder to stay ahead of the curve. This cycle eventually ends with you crashing in despair, wondering what makes life worthwhile.

We keep insanely believing that doing the same things will bring about a different result. Instead, we need to question the beliefs on which we base our life efforts. In his book *Happier*, Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D. talks about training with the Israeli national squash team when he was 16 years old. At that time, he believed winning the championship was necessary for him to feel fulfilled and fulfillment was essential for happiness. He did win and as he savored the mountain-top happy feeling, the everyday emptiness came flooding back.

*I was befuddled and afraid. The tears of joy shed only hours earlier turned to tears of pain and helplessness. For if I was not happy now, when everything seemed to have worked out perfectly, what prospects did I have of attaining lasting happiness?...But as the days and months unfolded, I did not feel happier; in fact, I was growing even more desolate as I began to see that simply substituting a new goal -- winning the world championship, say --- would not in itself lead me to happiness. Ben-Shahar, *Happier*, p. 4.*

At some point, every person asks the question, “*Is this all there is to life?*” We may ask it when we’re at the top of the mountain or in a deep pit from which we never seem to climb out of -- but we all ask it. The Outcome-based, logical strategy dangles the carrot, telling us to pull up our boots and to put in extra effort and time. It promises if we work hard, we can achieve all our dreams. Has that been true in your life? For me, all that hard work left me burned out and exhausted.

For Christians, this strategy usually means we throw ourselves into church and ministry. We desperately seek emotional highs during worship and obsessively spend our time giving to others. But even these “good” things leave us feeling exhausted, empty, incompetent, worthless, and desperate for happiness and joy. In such a place, we are vulnerable to manipulation and self-destruction. Rather than continuing to do more, why not re-evaluate your life strategy?

My clients laugh at how I talk about loving my bed the way most women love chocolate. Waking up in the morning, I relish the firmness of the mattress and how my body feels rested and refreshed. I stretch like a contented kitty and laughingly make invisible “snow angels” under the sheets. It’s such a little, inconsequential thing in the big picture of life. But such contentedness spurs me to prayers of thankfulness for how my life has been transformed in only a few short years. Living an Outcome-based lifestyle meant enduring never-ending fear, self-protection, bitterness, and resentment.

How do you know which system you are living in? Pray Psalm 51 and ask God to show you if any of these Outcome-based themes are present in your heart and mind on a regular basis:

- *Blaming others*
- *Refusing to take responsibility for one’s own issues*
- *Living in learned helplessness*
- *Taking on the identity of a martyr*
- *Giving up on life, living in despair and hopelessness*
- *Attempting to fix others through manipulative techniques*
- *Demanding obedience while denying personhood*
- *Denying the role of emotions*
- *Striving to be independent rather than interdependent*
- *Living life as Martha instead of Mary*
- *Choosing to prioritize ministry at the expense of relationships*
- *Denying immaturities and defending them to others*
- *Refusing to allow others to know you for fear of being hurt*

- *Creating rules legislating worth, value and acceptance*

I embrace being filled with the fullness of God and having the opportunity to pour that out on my clients daily in my office. Where I once hated to wake up in the morning because it would be another heavy, busy, demanding day full of disappointment and despair, I now absolutely love my life. Yes, I have hard days with frustrations and difficulties. However, I am committed to knowing in my soul the truth of God's heart. It's a gut knowing that surpasses head knowledge, giving me a godly viewpoint of life where I'm able to see truth and move toward it in every area of my life. This Relational lifestyle brings the happiness and joy every human being was created to desire.

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What do you think God created humankind?
2. How does that belief shape your view of who God is and how he feels about you?
3. Do you love yourself as well as you love others?
4. How do you process feeling like God is disappointed or upset with you?
5. What is your heart motivation when you ask God hard questions?
6. In what ways do you equate value and worth with following rules and standards?
7. Which model do you primarily live out, Relational or Outcome-based?
8. How do you pursue happiness?
9. What Outcome-based themes are present in your life?
10. How does fear keep you from living a Relational life?