

Love Speaks Many Languages Fluently



BY DAVID POWLISON

Recently a friend asked me a question that I think is of wider interest. He wrote, "I wonder what to make of the ideas presented in Gary Chapman's book about 'the five love languages.'¹ Some of it seems to make sense. It accurately describes some of the differences between my wife and me. I'm an actions-speak-louder-than-words person; she's wired for honest sharing and quality time. Our conflicts frequently boil down to collisions between our very different expectations. And we've learned that part of loving each other is giving what actually blesses the other. But something about the book doesn't sound right to me. It seems like a glorified form of 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.'"

This man's response to *The Five Love*

¹Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1992, 1995), 203 pages. Chapman and several coauthors have written follow-up books addressing children and teens more particularly. Other popular books in the same genre include Willard Harley's *His Needs, Her Needs* ("Become aware of each other's emotional needs, and learn to meet them....The ten emotional needs are admiration, affection, conversation, domestic support, family commitment, financial support, honesty and openness, physical attractiveness, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment"); and John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* ("Men and women give the kind of love they need and not what the opposite sex needs. Men primarily need a kind of love that is trusting, accepting, and appreciative. Women primarily need a kind of love that is caring, understanding, and respectful").

Languages captures in a nutshell the helpful strengths and the underlying weaknesses of this and similar books. On the positive side, the book rings bells when it describes how people typically come wired. For example,

- Love is *expressed* in many different forms. To describe these as "languages" vividly captures this variety, and hints at potential difficulties in communication. It's a great metaphor.
- People *experience* being loved in many different ways. Often your care for another, or another's care for you, will either communicate or misfire, depending on whether the language "spoken" comes in the language of the "hearer."
- People tend to demonstrate love to another in the same way they want to receive it, whether or not they're speaking that other person's language.
- When people don't get what they want or give what the other wants, it tends to breed anger and estrangement.

In addition to these accurate descriptions of life lived, some of the advice that Chapman offers is constructive:

- Learn the other's language in order to love more thoughtfully. Because love considers the interests of another person, it makes sense to consider well what brings blessing to *this* human being.
- Take the initiative and persist in loving, whether or not the other person changes.

True love is self-giving, not self-seeking.

So, as the questioner indicated, when he loves his wife well, the two of them sit down regularly and simply talk for an hour or two. He lets her in on his joys and struggles, and seeks to draw her out. The relationship thrives when they connect to each other. When she loves him well, she carries her share of the chores and responsibilities. She looks for ways to take things off his shoulders. The relationship thrives when they help each other.

“Love languages” describe different strokes for different folks. My friend feels loved (and tends to express love) by Chapman’s “Love Language #4: Acts of Service”: helping, providing, protecting, and other ways that actions speak louder than words. His wife, on the other hand, feels loved (and tends to show love) by Chapman’s “Love Language #2: Quality Time”: honest sharing to generate mutual understanding and an atmosphere of trust. The other three love languages discussed in *The Five Love Languages (5LL)* also each have their fluent native speakers: affirming words (#1), gift-giving (#3), and physical affection (#5). It’s helpful to know this about each other. To act on it sweetens relationships.

What phenomena is Chapman looking at, understood theologically? Such differences express the outworking of God’s creation and providence. God makes people with wide variations of temperament, personality, interest, and motivation (overlying the core commonalities of human nature). He arranges and governs wide variations in life experience, opportunities, socialization, and enculturation (also adding coloration to core commonalities). These variations on the human theme find expression in our often marked individual differences. Furthermore, the Lord of all the earth often seems to put people together in marriage who are wired differently. As a result, either we grow to complement each other by learning to give intelligent love, or we incinerate the marriage on the battlefield of insistently different demands.

5LL also accurately describes how we tend to misfire in attempting to love others. We tend to do for others exactly the *same* things that we want them to do for us, without actually considering their interests. For example, one

year on my Dad’s birthday, my brother and I gave him a kit to build an elaborate scale model of the *U.S.S. Constitution*, complete with microscopic details right down to the rigging and paint. My Dad loved to hike, camp, swim, and sail, but he was never known to sit down and do a craft project. Guess who was into building models? We loved Dad, but not very well.

Obviously, the most basic *violations* of the Golden Rule occur when we simply mistreat others, doing and saying malicious things we’d hate to have done and said to us. But perhaps the most common *misunderstanding* of the Golden Rule is that even in attempting to love others we do what we would want. It’s a less heinous form of self-centeredness, more clumsy and ignorant than hateful. Such clumsiness and ignorance is the problem that *5LL*, at its best, actually addresses. (Though Chapman makes the further claim that a person will mistreat other people—violate them, act hatefully—because *others*, out of ignorance of the right love language, haven’t loved that person and filled his tank of needs. More on that questionable assertion later.)

Chapman taps into a deep instinct in human nature. If you give people what makes them feel given to, they will tend to give back. If you pay attention to what rings the bells of your spouse (or parents, roommates, kids, boss, and coworkers), then you’ll treat them better. They’ll probably treat you better, too. At the same time, if you ask them for what you want in an open and simple way (less demanding, less oblique), then they’ll probably do better at giving you what you want. On the flip side, spouses (and parents, teachers, managers, salesmen, pastors, and other counselors) who don’t pay any attention at all to what makes others happy—who are hostile, or who don’t tailor their efforts to the other—mistreat others and create alienation.

Let’s say I’m in the market for a minivan. If car salesman X sells me a lemon at a rip-off price, I’ll intensely dislike him. Because he has done *evil*, I’ll seek legal recourse, pursue reparations, and report him to the Better Business Bureau. If salesman Y tries to sell me a sports car when I’m really looking for a minivan, I’ll merely dislike him. Because he’s *clueless*, I’m not likely to do business with him

or to recommend him to friends. But if salesman Z sells me the minivan I want at a fair price, I'll like him. He gave me what I was looking for. Because he was *helpful* for my agenda, I'll tell my friends. He fulfilled my desire for a minivan, and I fulfilled his desire for a commission, and so we get along great. *5LL* aims to turn clueless people into helpful people. But it doesn't address shysters like Mr. X. It also doesn't address customers who want to buy a new minivan every week.

What is Chapman working with here? Unwittingly, he exalts the observation that "even tax collectors, gentiles, and sinners love those who love them" (Matt. 5:46f; Luke 6:32ff) into his guiding principle for human relationships. This is the dynamo that makes his entire model go. This is the instinct that he appeals to in his readers. If I scratch your back, you'll tend to scratch mine. If you're happy to see me, I'll tend to be happy to see you, too. So, *5LL* teaches you how to become aware of what others want, and then tells you to give that to

leaders, the leaders were incensed and humiliated. No affirming words or acts of service towards them, and they didn't like it a bit. But the crowd loved Jesus for what He did for them. (Then He *invited* them into His kingdom, poking into their hearts, finding out what they lived for, and their reactions got more complicated.) When the shrewd servant cut his master's creditors a break, they loved him and welcomed him in. (Then Jesus *changed* the subject and upped the ante: Will heaven welcome you in?)

We might say that Chapman offers a bit of practical, moral wisdom about how "you, being evil, *can learn how* to give good gifts to your children and spouse" (tweaking Luke 11:13). Up to a point, *5LL* can be informative, correcting ignorance about how people differ from each other, and making you more aware of patterns of expectation that you and others bring to the table. The exhortations to take the initiative in giving to others could make the world a better place through more thoughtful

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them. This is the principle behind *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *The 30-second Manager*. It's the dynamic at work in hundreds of other books on "relational skills," or "attending skills," or "salesmanship," or "how to find the love you want." Identify the felt need and meet it, and, odds are, your relationships will go pretty well.

Those who pay attention often win affection. That's not necessarily bad, as far as it goes. But it doesn't go very far, and it does go bad easily, and it misses so many other really important things that are going on at the same time. When the crowd was hungry, Jesus fed them and they loved Him. (But when He bid to *change* their script by dealing with their bread-obsession, they grumbled.) When Martha and Mary lost their brother, Jesus gave Lazarus back to them. (But before He gave them what they wanted, He worked to *change* what they really wanted and needed.) When Jesus healed the crippled woman and rebuked the religious

treatment of others: "Many couples say that choosing to love and expressing it in the primary love language of their spouse has made a drastic difference in their marriage...It creates a climate where the couple can deal with the rest of life in a much more productive manner" (pp. 173f).

So far, so good. I have little doubt that the testimonials about happier marriages are honest (though a bit gushing). Common grace, even among tax collectors, does do some genuine good in this world. It raises human relationships above the level of naked self-interest and adversarial manipulation or bullying. Dog-eat-dog marriages become happier when couples learn how to generate some win-win dynamics. If I am to love another wisely, I will attend to what communicates care and concern to *this* particular person—not to humanity in general, not to me, not to the last person I talked with.

Love languages are part of the story of

human relations. But speaking love languages is surely not the whole story. In fact, it is practical, *immoral* wisdom—manipulation or pandering or both—when it becomes the whole story. Part of considering the interests of others is to do them tangible good. But then to really love them, you usually need to help them see their itch as idolatrous, and to awaken in them a far more serious itch! That's basic Christianity. *5LL* will never teach you to love at this deeper, more life-and-death level. Chapman's *reasons* for giving accurate love to others, his *explanation* of what speaking another's love language does, his ultimate *goal* in marriage, and his evaluation of the *significance* of love languages are deplorable.

The core premises of *5LL* are simply false. They pander to the very problem that most needs solving. Chapman writes,

Could it be that deep inside hurting couples exists an invisible "emotional love tank" with its gauge on empty? Could the misbehavior, withdrawal, harsh words, and critical spirit occur because of that empty tank? If we could find a way to fill it, could the marriage be reborn? Could that tank be the key that makes marriage work? (p. 23)

Read those sentences again slowly. No doubt, people often feel extreme hurt and bitterness when they are not loved. People commit adultery, avoid, argue, and judge when they perceive their spouses as failing them. But think hard about this. If you were loved, if your spouse or parent or friends did better, would your problems be fundamentally solved? Does having an empty love tank *cause* you to mistreat others? Do you return evil for evil because evil is done to you? If love tanks could only get filled all around, if others could just speak your language and if you could just speak theirs, would that really produce the kingdom of relational sweetness and light? If you could only give others enough of the right thing, would they love you in return? Is the principle that "gentiles love those who love them" really the *key* principle for producing marital success and happiness? The answer to each question in this paragraph is a profound No.

The *5LL* model fails the class "Human

Nature 101." Like all secular interpretations of human psychology (even when lightly Christianized), it makes some good observations and offers some half-decent advice (of the sort that self-effort can sometimes follow). But it doesn't really understand human psychology. That basic misunderstanding has systematic distorting and misleading effects. Fallenness not only brings ignorance about how best to love others; it brings a perverse unwillingness and inability to love. It ingrains the perception that our lusts are in fact needs, empty places inside where others have disappointed us. The empty emotional tank construct is congenial to our fallen instincts, not transformative. It leaves what we instinctively want as an unquestionable good that must somehow be fulfilled. It not only leaves fundamental self-interest unchallenged, it plays to self-interest. Chapman gives tax collectors, gentiles, and sinners something they can do on their own that might work to make them happier. The case studies end with, "My love tank has never felt so full and I've never been happier." It sounds more like opiates for the masses than The Revolution needed to bring in the kingdom of solid joys and lasting treasures. Chapman's model is premised on a give-to-get economy: "I will give to fill your love tank. But in the back of my mind I'm always considering whether and when I'll get my own tank filled."

On the one hand, the model creates an economy of love that is highly sentimentalized. For example, why does a person commit adultery? "Thousands of husbands and wives have been there—emotionally empty, wanting to do the right thing, not wanting to hurt anyone, but being pushed by their emotional needs to seek love outside of marriage" (p. 131). This portrays the poor adulterer as a victim, as so well-intended, so needy, so disappointed by others' inability to love him the right way. The adulterer's self-pity and self-righteousness are neatly preserved by the empty love tank notion. There is no call to really face yourself, to fear the Lord, to come to *metanoia* and a total change of life-orientation. There is no need for a substitute to take the death sentence for capital crimes you have committed. There is no need for living water and resurrection because you are dead in sins and worship lusts under the

alias “emotional needs.”

On the other hand, this model creates an economy of love that is cruel and seductive. For example, why do children act up and act out?

If the emotional need is not met, they may violate acceptable standards, expressing anger toward parents who did not meet their needs, and seeking love in inappropriate places...Most misbehavior in children and teenagers can be traced to empty love tanks...The growing number of adolescents who run away from home and clash with the law indicate that many parents who may have sincerely tried to express their love to their children have been speaking the wrong love language. (pp. 163, 169, 175)

Notice again the sentimentality about both parties: you meant well, and your kids are simply running on empty. None of you have actually done anything that might cause a blow to your self-esteem or might necessitate Christ's bloodshed on your behalf.

Notice also the cruelty: your ignorance caused Johnny's problem by draining his emotional tank. Parent, if you could only have filled his tank, and connected better to him... Such a logic is bitter. But notice also that it is still extremely seductive, because of the same causal dynamic. Your ability to redeem the situation lies at hand. If Johnny does evil things because you failed to fill his tank, then the possibility of his restoration also lies significantly in your power. Just start speaking his language. Of course, no one can guarantee the outcome, but we can come pretty close: “If all goes well and their emotional needs are met, children develop into responsible adults” (p. 163). That is a psychologist's dream, not a Christian's hope.²

The same cruelly seductive principle applies to reaching an adulterous or hostile spouse. Dedicate yourself to filling the other's tank—for example, by compliments and sexual availability (pp. 147-159). There is “a good

possibility” that the misbehaving spouse will reciprocate “because we tend to respond positively to the person who is meeting our deepest emotional need” (p. 153). Even God's call to “love your enemies,” to which Chapman refers throughout this section, is bent to his “gentiles love those who love them” paradigm, not to the Bible's call to something qualitatively different. Chapman motivates a bitter wife to love her bitter husband for six months by a vision for gradually filling his love tank so that he might eventually reciprocate and fill her tank. Where Jesus says, “Expect nothing in return” (Luke 6:35) and tests what we are living for by how we handle evil, this woman acts in the hope of fulfilling her dreams.

5LL does slightly alter the “You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours” calculus. It is a “glorified version,” taking a small step in the right direction by reversing the order. “I scratch your back (and then it's likely you'll scratch mine).” Chapman's full working philosophy might be summarized this way: “I'll find out where you itch, and I'll scratch your back, so you feel better. Along the way, I'll let you know my itches in a non-demanding manner. You'll feel good about me because your itches are being scratched, so eventually you'll probably scratch my back, too.” Chapman softens the demand and encourages unilateral initiative, but everything is still hitched to fundamental self-interest. *5LL* replaces naked self-interest with civilized self-interest. “I give, hoping to get” is a step above “I only give if I've gotten,” but it's not all that different. The music of relational give-and-take still plays in the key of GET, though the arrangement is different.

I happened to be reading Anne Lamott's book on writing, *Bird by Bird*, the same week I read *5LL*.³ Lamott is one of the Lord's more uncivilized saints—the kind of odd believer who makes one feel amazed at God's goodness and a little queasy at the same time! She sees many things with searing clarity, and she never pulls a punch. I got thinking, what might be Anne Lamott's love language? Interestingly, she happens to discuss in passing each of the five

²Notice, I'm not saying that a parent should not “speak Johnny's language” as part of attempting to love him well. I'm questioning Chapman's interpretation of what such intelligent love means and what it does.

³Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). She tells the story of her faith in *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

things that Chapman labels “love languages.” But none of them are her real language.

Make no mistake, Anne Lamott *likes* words of affirmation and good book reviews (LL #1), but then she talks about how they can be “cocaine for the ego.” She likes quality time with people who are her friends (LL #2), but what comes out when you really know people is often ambiguous or even hellish. She *likes* thoughtful gifts, the bouquet at the door or a casserole when she’s been too busy (LL #3), but such small favors brighten an abyss of infinite need for the world to be made right. She *likes* it when others help her, or when she helps others as a teacher or as part of a nursing home ministry (LL #4), but at the end of the day she’s still alone with what she herself must do to live her life with integrity. She *likes* physical affection (LL #5), but she knows great ambivalence because touch so often proves perverse.

fixing adequate. Now it probably wouldn’t hurt Anne Lamott to lighten up a bit now and then. She lives far out on the ragged edge. But 5LL is just too easy. It could profit from a big dose of hard-edged realism and glorious salvation.

Chapman treats desires as givens, as “love languages” to be spoken in order to fill “love tanks” that become empty. He never deals with the fact that people can *desire* evil. Immorality, violence, stubborn willfulness, heavy drinking, obsession with career or looks or money or house or reputation..., do these come from empty places inside basically good people? I don’t think so. Such things arise from active evil inside us. Chapman never deals with the fact that even desires for good things can still be *evil desires* in God’s analysis of what makes us tick. Your “love language” (like mine, like the people in Chapman’s case studies) is a curious mix of creation and fall.

For example, I thrive on intimate conver-

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Lamott’s writing aims to honestly depict dark, raw forces spinning down the vortex of the human condition. I’d say she *really* wants one thing, that her primary love language is this: “Oh our God and only Savior, have mercy on us. Remove the sin and misery that cling so closely. Destroy evil and perversity from within us. Destroy pain and death that come upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us.” She has an empty redemption tank. Her love language plays hardball, not whiffleball.

Gary Chapman’s world seems so sunny and blithe, so easy, so matter-of-fact in comparison. The problems of life seem so fixable. His advice is so doable. A bit of education and a bit of self-effort are all that’s needed for life to sing. The marriages in his book don’t need Jesus’ blood, sweat, and tears. The people don’t *need* help and power from outside themselves in order even to stumble in the right direction. They don’t *need* Jesus to come back, because they consider the current

sation, on honest knowing and being known in a context of loving, mutual concern. I like to understand and be understood: LL #2. It’s part of why I love counseling and the opportunity to really know people in a constructive context. It points to a great way that friends bless me, and we get along fine. But it also describes a monster inside that would swallow the universe. A love language instinctively tends to look at all reality through the lens of “my needs” (even if it never reads a book teaching it to call itself a need). It can be a lust language, by which to gauge the relative fullness or emptiness of a lust tank. I’ve found that one acid test of my heart is how I handle being misunderstood, caricatured, reviled, dissed—not how I handle being accurately known and loved! It’s when someone doesn’t speak my “love language” that I find out what I’m made of, and by God’s grace begin to change what I live for. Desires for good things easily become imperial demands that would enslave the very

people who might try to speak my language—or yours. The lust that perverts such languages sets up an unholy law by which to command and to judge the performance of others in the eyes of an unholy king.⁴

Chapman's couples know no repentance and no forgiveness for what they long for and live for, the life goals around which they organize their experience. *5LL* amplifies the ground bass that beats deep within fallen hearts; it does not change the music. It gives no intrinsic reason to worship Christ crucified, to live with a grateful heart, to repent of only loving those who love me, that I might learn to really love enemies for Christ's sake.

In a lengthy case study of an adulterer, Chapman simply describes a man who got

resources." May seem impossible? For some? May require us to draw on spiritual resources? This coddles us and insults God.

Jesus puts things in a different light. Your ability to really love your enemies, to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect, and to do generous good even to the ungrateful and wicked required that Christ learn obedience through what He suffered. It required Christ to die because of your natural enmity to God. It requires the Holy Spirit's power to give you a wholly new life. It requires the Father's patient hand to prune and grow you in a way of life that is otherwise impossible—even inconceivable. It requires nothing less than radical repentance, living faith, and renewal of your whole heart that you might begin to learn how to really

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burned out and feels bad when his mistress stops giving him what he wants. When his tank runs on empty again, he returns to counseling, and he and his wife set about learning to speak each other's love languages to fill each other's tanks (pp. 129-136). She meets the needs the mistress failed to meet. He loves that, and gives to her, too. Everything is restored. This particular story is appalling. There's no nicer way to say it. Chapman prettifies our lusts, rather than naming them for what they are in God's eyes. Name them for what they are, and the Lord of life will forgive us, that He might slay unruly flesh. Slay the sovereignty of our love language, and He will rewire us by grace and the expulsive power of new affections that we might speak a new language fluently.

The closest *5LL* comes to our need for the gospel is a paragraph on page 174: "The ability to love, especially when your spouse is not loving you, may seem impossible for some. Such love may require us to draw upon our spiritual

love. Such a faith working through love is the product of a good news worth living for and dying for.

Chapman's couples live in a world whose problems they caused and whose problems they can fix (maybe with a little help, if necessary, for some). Jesus' couples live in a far more desperate world. Merciful bloodshed and new creation are needed to fix what is really wrong with marriages. The couples in Jesus' case studies learn to repent of their innate love languages and love tanks. They *need* help from outside: the poor in spirit are blessed. They slowly learn to give others truly good gifts. Yes, they will generously speak the love-languages of others. Just as Jesus fed bread to the hungry in John 6, so my friend will sit down and talk intimately with his wife. Redemption is not less than what Chapman tells people to do. But it is so much more. And it does everything for such different reasons. Jesus' couples do lots of other things in addition to seeking to love accurately. They seek forgiveness and forgive. They call things what they are. They aim to redemptively remake what others live for, even as God is remaking them. They live for God, not for

⁴Again, remember that we are criticizing the premises, explanatory dynamic, and goals of *5LL*, not the call to treat others with thoughtful generosity.

getting what they want. Jesus offered Himself as the bread of life, when all that the hungry crowd wanted was more pita bread to fill their empty bread tank! After that one feather-light gesture in the direction of the gospel on page 174, Chapman returns to his drumbeat of love languages.

The love of Christ speaks a “love language”—mercy to hellishly self-centered people—that no person can hear or understand unless God gives ears to hear. It is a language we cannot speak to others unless God makes us fluent in an essentially foreign language. We might say that the itch itself (an ear for God’s language) has to be created, because we live in such a stupor of self-centered itchiness. The love language model does not highlight those exquisite forms of love that do not “speak your language.” You and I need to learn a new language if we are to become fit to live with each other and with God. The greatest love ever shown does not speak the instinctively self-centered language of the recipients of such love. In *fundamental* ways, the love of Christ speaks contrary to your “love language” and “felt needs.” Does anyone naturally say, “I need You to rule me so I’m no longer ruled by what I want”? Does anyone naturally say, “For Your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my iniquity for it is great” (Psalm 25:11)? Does anyone naturally say, “My greatest need is for mercy, and then for the wisdom to give mercy. I long for redemption. May Your kingdom come. Deliver us from evil”?

God’s grace aims to destroy the lordship of the five love languages, even while teaching us to speak the countless love languages with greater fluency. Consider what Chapman’s five so often sound like in real life.

- Affirming words? I feel loved when the crowd cheers, and when you offer me flattering compliments, like the “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest one of all?”
- Quality time? I feel loved when you drop everything to focus on me, are completely understanding, give me unconditional love, agree with all my opinions, and never disagree with me, question me, or interrupt me.
- Gifts? I feel loved when you are my Sugar Daddy, giving me money, buying me lots of nice stuff, taking me on exotic vacations, and

pampering me.

- Acts of service? I feel loved when you do exactly what I want, and don’t make any demands on me, and say, “Your wish is my command.”
- Physical touch? I feel loved when you go along with my kinky sexual fantasies and when you make me feel like the most special person in the world.

Notice how each of the five love languages often speaks with a dark and greedy growl. Notice the black hole of insatiable demand when love languages call the shots, when the emotional love tank rules with an iron will or a self-indulgent smirk or a pouty tantrum.

We usually recognize when other people’s “love languages” grow overtly perverse (Chapman never discusses this problem). We rarely recognize when our own language gets edgy. And we have a very hard time recognizing that the love languages are perverse even when they rule “reasonably.” They were never intended to rule.

At the end of the day, a book such as *5LL* makes some interesting observations. It can point out some details you might not have noticed. You ought to pay attention to the varied languages of human experience, your own included. It offers a few helpful tips that might help you love someone better. That’s good. But you better not buy the reasoning. *5LL* speaks essentially “unwholesome words” (Eph. 4:29) when it comes to identifying and addressing the real needs of the human condition. How can all this be? How can perceptive observations, wide case experience, and some good advice be wedded to an utterly perverse underlying dynamic? How can someone who knows people and wants to help them get the actual dynamic of our souls so wrong?

5LL is not unusual in this regard, but commonplace. The *kind* of thing that this book does is replicated in every Psychology 101 textbook, in each of the personality theories, and in all the self-help books on the shelves of Barnes & Noble (in the Christian bookstore, too?). A torrent of observations is systematically shunted into the wrong categories; bits of half-decent advice head boldly in the wrong direction. The same *kind* of thing is replicated in any conversation where the actual human condition is neither faced nor addressed,

whether we call it counseling or therapy or a good talk or shooting the breeze. When the analysis of what is wrong does not lead directly to our need for the person and work of the Messiah, then that analysis is shallow. The solution necessarily becomes some version of “Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”

Where do you turn if you are blinded with pain and rage, with fear and despair, with disappointment and desire? What do you do if you are plunged into escapist fantasies and waking nightmare, if you are driven by sordid passions and patterns of self-destruction? What

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Wise counseling calls for many different forms of wisdom. The previous pages have aimed at wisdom in *discernment*. How do we learn to sort out good from bad amid the messages that bombard us? It’s easy to state the goal: “Eat the fish of truth, spit out the bones of lies.” It’s hard to do this well. All of us tend to either swallow bones because we love fish, or spit out fish because we hate bones. I hope that I’ve been able to separate the sweet fish from the choking bones in assessing Chapman’s book. Those you

Life in the kingdom is much more complex than just lining up one abstract model against another abstract model.

help is there for you amid all the hells that attend broken and breaking relationships? Will it help you to aim for the standards by which tax collectors, gentiles, and sinners attempt to make life work? Is it enough to try make others feel good about you in hopes that they’ll make you feel good about yourself?

Christ will take any one of us—blind and flailing beasts, tax collectors, gentiles, sinners, feuding spouses, the whole lot, even nice people—and will freely make us over into children of the Father. Those for whom He died, He lives to remake.

Yes, love others generously and accurately. I pray that your love will abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment. Intelligent love is a gift of God, a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, take unilateral initiative, and don’t quit. Love your enemies. Unreciprocated love expresses the image of your Father.

But aim for a lot more, too, and do everything for very different reasons. The love of Christ controls us in that one died for all, and therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Grow fluent in the love of Christ, the love language that no one naturally speaks or hears, but everyone needs.

counsel must learn to sort good from bad, just as those who counsel must learn to sort good from bad.

But counseling takes other skills, too. *Using Scripture well* is a necessary and hard-won wisdom. It takes peculiar skills to engage in the give-and-take, fits-and-starts, slow progress of *conversation*, skills different from what’s involved in delivering a prepared, orderly public message. *Understanding people* calls for you to develop a case-wise feel for how real people operate in the real world, and how the change process actually occurs. And, at every point, your essential *character* is on the line, especially in the midst of disagreements. Do you deal with others in ways that are charitable yet candid, courageous yet merciful, fair yet teachable, and patient through it all? The Holy Spirit who is the Lord authors and gives away the diverse wisdoms we need. I hope that this issue of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* will serve the Spirit’s multiple purposes. Here’s what is coming in the pages that follow.

Ken Sande’s “Charitable Judgments” talks through how to treat others constructively. You and I are hard-wired to evaluate what we see and hear: “The ear tests words as the palate tastes food.” So, how do you do so in a way that honors Jesus? No one would dare say, “My spiritual gifts are criticism and self-righteous-

ness,” but to act critically and react defensively is the easiest wicked thing we do.

“Painstaking Truth for Painful Times” brings Scripture carefully to life. William Smith communicates how God speaks into the experience of sufferers, both the content spoken and the manner of speaking. Smith gives a feel for how to work *with* those you counsel, rather than talking at them.

Andy Selle’s article aims at something similar, but with a narrower focus. “The Bridge over Troubled Waters: Overcoming Crippling Fear by Faith and Love” provides an extended case study of a woman who overcame a bridge phobia. Selle gives both the simple “Steps 1-2-3-4-5” and a complex sense of how change can’t really be broken down into steps and principles. A friendly critic of *JBC* once challenged me, “I almost always agree with the theological content and practical principles, but most articles don’t give much of a feel for the counseling process, the methodology, what it’s really like to talk with a troubled person. I think well-meaning people too often turn biblical counseling into private preaching, and miss the subtleties and opportunities of good counseling.”

I hope the previous two articles at least take a stab at addressing my friend’s concern. Winston Smith’s “Dawning Insights and Changing Agendas” more directly wrestles with those questions of process. In fact, it *is* process, the transcription of a half-hour slice of counseling, with annotations. It records the “he said, she said,” and then adds the counselor’s reflections on what he was thinking at the time and attempting to do.

“Learning Contentment in All Your Circumstances” by Robert Jones is straightforward theology and principle, an applied

exposition of Philippians 4. Discontent, complaining, and anxiety are such universal problems. Every person you will ever know would be deeply changed by grasping and living the things that Jones writes.

Patrick Ramsey also articulates careful theological principles in his “Judging according to the Bible.” He aims for the third way of godly wisdom. It is radically different both from judgmentalism and from all-accepting tolerance. Backbone and gentleness are not mutually exclusive.

In our public ministry section (not that any and all of the above “personal ministry” articles can’t be adapted to preaching and teaching!), Skip Ryan preaches “The King’s Humiliation” from Luke 9:18-26. You might want to pay particular attention to how he appeals to the imagination by his use of metaphor, vivid language, and stories. In the articles by William Smith, Andy Selle, and Winston Smith, you saw how a conversation connects to where a person lives, in order to implant truth into lives. Here you see something similar in the public address idiom.

We review two research articles, rather than a book. The issue of “placebo effects” has recently received a great deal of popular and scientific attention. Placebo phenomena are a fine point of contact for biblical truth to speak to current cultural concerns.

Finally, in *Queries & Controversies*, Ed Welch addresses the question, “What about hypnotism?” We opened on a discernment note, and we’ll close there also. But I hope that along the way you will be enriched for the positive ministry of truth and love that is the whole point of discernment!