

The Value and Qualities of Good Homework

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When you think about Biblical Counseling, one of the aspects that stands out the most is the assigning of Homework. When you hear ‘homework’ you might have traumatic flashbacks to your high school days when you were rushing to finish your algebra assignments, so I hope that talking about it today will not cause you to have cold sweats. The goal of this post is to talk about the value of homework as we discuss its purpose in counseling. After that, I’ll work through some of the common frameworks that you, as a counselor, should be thinking through when you assign homework.

Why is Homework Needed?

As we consider this topic, we need to first step back and consider what we mean by counseling. What I mean by counseling is a meeting between a counselor and a counselee(s) where the counselee is coming for help. This is a relationship where they are not saying “we are spiritual equals”, but, rather, in the spirit of Galatians 6:1, “You who are spiritual...” are helping someone in need of aid. In that counseling relationship, the counselor will have to do a lot of things. They will have to ask questions about the problem, about the person’s life and history, about how they have been acting in a way that is not pleasing to Christ, and so on. The counselor will have to do a careful job listening to everything that the counselee has said, and the counselor will have to provide Biblical, gospel-centered hope and encouragement in the session. At the end of the session (usually at the end), the counselor should start assigning homework—steps for the counselee to do after they leave the counseling room. It is in that vein that we should examine why homework is needed.

1. Because the counselor is not able to cover everything in the session

You get one hour a week, and there are 168 hours in a week. As a counselor, you will not be able to teach everything you want to teach, ask as many questions as you want to ask, give as much hope as you want to give, spend as much time in prayer as you'd like, etc. You need to assign good homework because you only have limited time, and that counselee needs more than a one-hour help session.

2. Because taking practical steps will help train the counselee to righteousness

James 1:21 tells us not just to be a hearer of the word, but a doer of the word! This is essential for the Christian life. Christ demands that His followers live out the life that He calls them to. By assigning them homework, we are helping them learn to walk the way Christ calls them to. Good homework can look like a lot of things, but one thing it must do is promote healthy spiritual disciplines, such as Bible reading, Church attendance, prayer, community and church involvement, and repentance. Homework has the goal of helping the person think, desire, and act like Christ.

3. Because homework will expose the heart

When you assign homework you never really know what you are going to get next week when they come back. When you assign homework, you will reveal all kinds of heart situations that you were not able to dig out (or prove) in the counseling room.

4. Provides a tangible spiritual measure

There will be times in counseling when you need to answer the question, "How is my counselee doing?" One (but not the only) way that you can answer how they are doing is by looking at their homework. By looking at their

homework, you can see if they are taking meaningful steps of change (for example: a person can't be in love with Christ if he is not reading his Bible). Also, you will be able to measure their faithfulness to Christ (you can't say, "I am faithful" and never get your homework done on time). The point is, homework can provide a helpful measure. While there will be others, looking at the homework will be beneficial.

With those reasons, let's move to what makes homework good!

Essential Qualities of Homework

If we think carefully about what needs to go into the various assignments, that we assign for those that we are trying to help, we will end up helping them grow to become like Christ more productively, and we will also minimize things like frustrations and miscommunications.

1. Objective

Can you answer with a simple yes or no that they did the homework? While many assignments will have a subjective nature to them, a goal should be to make homework as objective as possible.

2. Measurable

You should tell your counselee how often you want them to do something, like review a passage, how many pages or chapters to read in a book, or how many times they should read their Bible. Leaving gray areas for counselees only leads to confusion for them and frustration for you.

3. Specific

Don't just say, "Read a book on worry." You need to assign them a particular verse, passage, or chapter that gets to not only the fruit but also the root of their problems.

4. Understandable

Minimize any language that will confuse your counselee. Using loaded terms and jargon that may sound nice from the pulpit but are vague in their mind will not be helpful.

5. Essential

Anything you assign should go through the lens of, “Do they need to do this?” If the answer is not “yes” then do not assign it. They, like you, are busy. Homework should not be busy work, so make sure they need to be doing what you are asking them to do.

Types of Homework

Lastly, we get to the different kinds of homework that you should seek to implement. You will need to use different types at different times based on the needs of your counseling case. In some cases you will use some of these types the entire way through. Depending on what type of counselor you are, you will pick various types of homework. But, the reality is, you will probably need to use all of these different types of homework.

1. Memorization and Application of Scripture

I put those together because simply memorizing (or meditating) a verse is not enough in counseling.

Example: Meditate on [Romans 8:28-29](#) four times this week and give three examples of when you chose to see the suffering you are going through as what God is doing in your life to make you like Christ.

2. Digging in the Heart

This type of homework is meant to provide data so that future growth and conversation can occur. The point is, there may be things that take time for the counselee to express, and writing is the best mode to do that, or you do not have the time in counseling. Assigning a homework that has the digging in their heart can help you and them.

Example: Write down and email to me by Sunday at 5 pm: what are some of the reasons that you have seen yourself get angry at your spouse? What are

you thinking about when he or she treats you a certain way? What is it you are longing for in those moments? What do you tend to do after he or she has treated you that way?

3. Putting Plans in Place

After you have begun to identify some problems with the counselee, you will have to work on the roots and fruits of those sins. Good counseling seeks to go after both, root and fruit.

Example: Write out a plan for how you intend to respond when tempted to _____ and email me by Friday at 5 pm.

Example of Plan: (1) pray that God removes the temptation. (2) Consider if I can run from temptation (3) Rehearse Proverbs 5 (4) Reach out to Accountability Partner (5) Spend time reading the document that has various truths from God's word on it that combat my situation.

4. Reading/Watching a Resource

As mentioned above, you only have so much time in counseling. That means you are going to need to assign all kinds of resources that the counselee should intake before you see them next. Perhaps it will be a good sermon, a chapter in a book (or the entire thing), maybe an article from a well-written blog (like this one!), or some other form of media. The point is, we live in a time where resources abound. Wise counselors use them. But make sure you do not just assign the resource; they need to interact with the resource in some way.

Example: Read Chapters 1-3 in Future Grace. Underline the ten most helpful things in the chapters and come ready to share next week. Also, give at least two examples when you chose to implement the idea of "Believing the Promises of God" and come ready to share next week.

5. Prayer

Finally, we need to make sure we are bathing our counseling in prayer and asking our counselee to bathe themselves in prayer. If we are not asking them

to pray for change, why should we ever expect them to change? Make sure that the prayer is specific to their situation and not just “pray for change.”

Example: Pray each morning that God would give you a heart that does not desire comfort, but a heart that desires service. Pray that God helps you see the value in loving others more than yourself and that you would find joy there.

Conclusion

Writing good homework is hard. It will take many years to master the art and craft of writing good homework. Some weeks you will look at the homework you have written and wonder if it came down from Heaven. Other weeks you will wonder what was going through your mind when you wrote that.

Regardless, keep up the practice and keep pressing on! If you can't write the homework in the session that is okay. If you need to wait for 12 hours and do some work yourself that is also okay. If you want to write out some pre-planned items because you think you have an idea of what is needed, that could be good (as long as you tentatively hold on to that and see where the session leads you). Writing good homework will only serve you and them better in the days ahead.