

A walk with Mr O (14)

Advice about giving advice.

Mr O, I need some advice about how to give advice!

What has brought this on?

It's like this; a friend recently came to see me about a very serious problem. I think I was able to help him, but it made me realise that I've never really thought about how to deal with people who ask for counsel.

You need to know that I have had no formal training in this area. But over the last sixty years I have spent a lot of time listening to people's problems, and I've now got to the stage where this is my principal occupation.

So, what is your approach?

As far as possible, I let people choose the time when they will talk to me. Different people are comfortable at different times of the day. Lots of people open up best at the end of the evening. Are you prepared for some late nights - some very late nights?

There you go again, Mr O, asking me questions that I've never thought about!

As far as possible, I also let people choose where they will meet me. Some folk talk best at home, others away from home. I sit nearest the door, to be able to escape any threat of violence. Except for elderly ladies, I only meet women in places where other people are hovering about. And I never meet children without the permission of a parent or guardian, and then only in a room where the door is ajar.

I can see the need for all those precautions. But how do you begin?

I begin with a 'preamble'. I explain to the person that they must only tell me things that they are comfortable telling me; that I will not breathe a word about what they say; and that this promise of maintaining confidence does not apply if they have been breaking the law.

And then what do you do?

I let them talk and talk and talk – occasionally interrupting them to pass them a tissue or to offer them a cup of tea – but never interrupting their story. I don't take notes, because this distracts them.

All the time I'm listening to them, I pray. I'm not a wise man. In almost all cases I haven't a clue about what they need to hear. But James 1:5 is still in the Bible and I believe it to be true. So, they talk, and I pray.

So, when they've got it all off their chest, what do you do next?

I ask them to tell me their story again. Sincere people need to know that they have been properly heard. Liars and time-wasters need to be given enough rope to hang themselves. And I need to be sure that I have really got hold of the issues.

This is all very time-consuming, isn't it?

Yes, but the second time round, people tend to be briefer. They also tend to focus more on the main points. And as I continue to pray, everything becomes clearer. The second round usually finishes in an atmosphere of trust – unless, of course, the person is a liar or a time-waster. If this becomes apparent I dismiss the person and tell them that I won't be meeting them again.

I assume that you now move on to give your advice to the sincere person who remains.

Not yet! I encourage people to go over their story yet again, but this time I ask them questions as they do so. I ask them what and where and when and how, but never why. This is because I want facts, not opinions. Why is never a helpful question to ask someone in trouble.

Once people have told their story three times, I find that they are always ready to listen to what I have to say. As trust has been growing throughout the session, I can be as blunt as I like. And because the Lord is faithful to His promise in James 1:5, I always have something to say.

I also know whether further counselling is necessary. It is in a spirit of amazed gratitude that I am able to close the session in prayer.