

# Counseling Angry, Unmotivated, Self-centered, and Spiritually-indifferent Teens



By Rick Horne

Counseling angry and indifferent young people typically begins with presenting issues. But counseling does not stop there. The youth counselor who tries to identify the teen's problem for him and then offers his own solutions, even his understanding of biblical solutions, does not have to wait very long—maybe five or ten minutes—to see the counseling session fail. The teen tunes out the counselor with polite tolerance, impatient for the session to end. Most often he does not return for a second interview. The angry teen believes that most adults who try to help do two things. They pick the problem(s) to work on, then offer solutions *they* believe will resolve the problem. In such a session, the teen mentally checks out in short order.

One mother brought her teen to me for counseling and complained, "John is just so unmotivated. He won't do anything that is good for him. He's grounded. He can't use the car. He's on academic probation. He is ineligible for wrestling. And he can't go out with his girlfriend. Nothing motivates him. We've even severely limited how much he can be at his job, which he loves. Nothing seems to work."

I looked at John and asked if his parents had imposed all of these consequences on him. He responded with a matter-of-fact "Yes."

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I sat back, looked at his mom and asked, "Could I share with you another way to look at John?"

She said, "Go ahead."

I continued. "John, I don't mean to show disrespect to your mother, but I couldn't disagree with her more. I've never seen a student more motivated than you!"

He leaned forward a bit. I had captured his interest. His mother was genuinely perplexed.

"You're grounded and can't go out with friends, right?"

He nodded agreement.

"You lost time at your job because of your grades, right? You can't use the car. You're on academic probation making you ineligible for wrestling. And you can't go out with your girlfriend."

"Yeah, that's right."

I looked at him and at his mother, paused, then asked, "So with all this restriction you still do the things that made you lose these privileges. Is that what I hear your mom say, John?"

He thought about his response and then slowly nodded agreement with my description of the situation.

"That is remarkable motivation," I said. "You want something so badly that you have committed yourself to enduring remarkable pain and loss in order to get it. That is serious dedication, not lack of motivation. I can only imagine what could be done in your life, John, if you decided to use that kind of intensity and

commitment to get things that could benefit you instead of things that bring loss and trouble.”

John was motivated—but not to do what his mother, the youth pastor, teachers, or I wanted, regardless of how noble, beneficial, or painful these goals seem. He was not even motivated to do what God wanted. He was motivated to pursue his own “wants.” Just because a young person is not motivated to go after the things the adults in his life want him to pursue, one cannot conclude that he is not motivated. All teens, no matter how indifferent to parental or school goals, are highly motivated.

### ***Start With the Teen’s “Wise Wants”***

If I am going to help John, I must tune into what he wants on two levels: first, what he is aware that he wants, and second his “wise wants”—his motives that contain some wisdom. If I can detect these “wise wants,” I may be able to help John see how he can get what he “wisely wants” by making biblically-principled choices. At the same time, I may be able to show John how his current actions now torpedo the very things he does want.

Solomon, in his proverbial counsel, presumes that motives are a part of us, even though we may not be aware of them. “A man’s ways seem right to him but motives are judged by the LORD” (Prov. 18:3). We all act. We all have thoughts about our acts. And we all have motives for our acts and thoughts. This verse does not give *carte blanche* approval to all motives. In fact, all our motives are contaminated by sin. But at this deeper level, because of God’s creation and common grace, other biblical testimony assumes that some of our motives contain some measure of wisdom.

We can fruitfully counsel young people who are committed to their wants by detecting and affirming their underlying “wise wants.” These are the desires, motives, longings and wants that God has created as part of our human nature. For sure, it is ultimately God’s purposes that the teen needs to pursue. It is God’s truth that will set the teen free. It is also the teen’s common self-centeredness that distorts his perspective about his problems and the real solutions to them. The purpose of this

article is to show that the way to get a teen to these points of conviction is to begin, as Scripture does in its model of youth ministry, in Proverbs with his “wise wants.”

### ***“Wise Wants”—a Scriptural Precedent for Beginning Youth Counseling***

God’s approach to young people, as pictured in the wisdom literature, shows that the young person’s interests are wise starting places for the counselor. In Proverbs, wise counsel to angry, foolish, or indifferent young people begins with apparent solutions to the desires and goals they already have. The vast majority of the proverbs make certain assumptions about the motivations of young adults. “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth” (Prov. 10:4) assumes that teens want to avoid poverty and acquire wealth. “A man is praised according to his wisdom, but men with warped minds are despised” (Prov. 12:8) assumes that young people want praise, approval, and respect and do not want the opposite. These desires are “wise wants.”

“Wise wants” inform the counsel in Proverbs. Presumably youth desire to have a reputation for trustworthiness and honor; parents who are proud of them and joyful because of them; healthy friendships, including delightful romance; a sense of security and confidence; usefulness in the lives of others; and competence and success in work. Other proverbs assume that young people want to be discerning and thoughtful; to use good judgment; to be able to respond effectively to others’ questions and demands; to combat laziness, selfishness, anger, lying, and lust; and to not be seduced, exploited, deceived or misled. God has programmed these desires, or “wise wants” into teens—into all of us. Counsel to young people can build upon these wants the same way Proverbs’ crisp counsel does. But youth counselors must first of all identify the teen’s “wise wants,” then see how these wise wants have been distorted by the folly of youthfulness.

Parents and other authorities often react to the teen’s foolish choices and miss his “wise wants.” This confusion is furthered by the faulty assumption that what the teen wants—as

reflected in his immediate choices, words, or patterns of behavior—is what he *really* wants. But most teens do not see where their choices lead. They do not live with an “eschatological perspective”—the big picture of how their decisions impact their future and God’s purposes for them. They are here-and-now people, just as Proverbs assumes them to be. What did John want so badly that it made him willing to dig in his heels, and at great personal cost, refuse to do anything his parents and teachers wanted him to do? The counselor has to ask this question. The counselor has to be geared to listen for the “wise want,” now distorted into foolish desires that direct the young person’s choices.

“What do you want?” is a powerful and critical question in youth counseling. Answers vary but give clues to wise wants. “I just want to graduate and get out of here.” “I want my parents to get off my back.” “I just want to talk to kids about the Lord—all this academic stuff means nothing.” “I just want to do what I want to do when I want to do it.” Are there any wise wants behind these statements? Or is the counselor duty-bound to confront the teen with his rebellion, self-centeredness, disrespect, and laziness? All of these may be features of John’s heart right now. But there is more to John than just these sinful responses.

Start by talking to this teen about how his stubbornness and disrespect can wreck his life and see how long you have his attention. Do this even with politeness and gentleness. The young person will not take long to realize whose wants are being addressed—and that they certainly are not his wants. There is more to look at than just the sin in counseling youth—as important as that is. The issue is not, “Do we deal with the sin or do we not?” The issue is *when and how* do we deal with the sin.

Let’s go back to my conversation with John. If I keep his “wise wants” in mind, I might say something like this:

*John, I want to commend you for having such a high level of commitment to your own goals. I respect that so much. You are not willing to be moved from the place you’ve settled into for anything or anybody. That level of determination is rare in many young adults.*

*Furthermore, I think I sense a real spirit of independence in you. That, too, is a mature goal. Are these the things I’m hearing you say you want?*

**I guess so.**

*How else would you describe what you want out of your relationship with your parents and your time here at school?*

**I just want to be able to make my own decisions.**

*That is a very mature desire, John. You want the freedom to make your own choices and to accept responsibility for your own life. Is that what you are saying?*

**Yes, I’m old enough to make my own decisions. But they keep treating me like a child.**

*Do you know where these desires for maturity, commitment, independence, and the sense of responsibility come from?*

**What do you mean?**

*Well, John, these desires have been created within you. They are not wrong in themselves. God has built these interests in you as one created in His image. I respect your desire to make your own decisions, to be independent, and to be committed to the way of living that you’ve set as a goal for yourself. But, let me ask you a question. Is the way you are handling things at school and at home getting you the independence and freedom that you want?*

**Well, no, not right now.**

In this brief conversation, I have touched on John’s wise wants. I listened carefully to John so that I could convey the fact that he’s not being talked into something that he does not want. John lets me lead him because I focus on *his* wants. John is motivated to do what will get him what he wants and to avoid what will block his goals.

**“Wise Wants” and Self-centeredness**

Is it possible that this appeal could encourage or reinforce John’s self-centeredness? Could this approach set up John to manipulate his parents or others to get what he wants? The answer is yes on both counts. But in spite of

these possibilities, the sages of Proverbs forge ahead with their pointed solutions-oriented counsel. They advise young people how to acquire what they wisely want—and what they certainly need. It is true that the counselors of Proverbs do this in the bigger context of the “fear of the Lord” (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). But while “the fear of the Lord” is the heart orientation that ought to control all choices, it seems to be a stretch to say that a teen’s commitment to the fear of the Lord is the necessary condition in Proverbs for giving him wise counsel. The statement “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” is good advice for both a godly person and an ungodly person. Similarly, “...humility comes before honor” can bring God’s favor to a pagan like King Nebuchadnezzar or to a godly young man like Samuel who fears the Lord.

The counsel in Proverbs is not only for parents to discuss with teens whose hearts are right with the Lord. Our deep desire is for all our teens’ changes to emerge from hearts that love Christ. We know that godly counsel must ultimately address the teen’s heart. But the journey that nurtures an angry teen’s godly choices usually does not begin by early steps in which we talk about his need to love and follow Christ. In time, our ministry setting may let us go there, but often it cannot start there.

Throughout Scripture, God imparted good sense, logical thinking, and wise decision-making abilities to kings and others who were not interested in the fear of the Lord. His counsel usually centered on their self-preservation, prosperity, health, and welfare. God gave wisdom to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Cyrus of Persia, Pharaoh and the tutors He provided for Moses, the Roman officials in Jesus’ time, Saul’s teacher Gamaliel, and people without number throughout biblical history. In addition, God allowed them to prosper as a result—even though many of them used His benefits for their own personal kingdom building: to enhance their pride, fuel their arrogance, and exploit God’s people. In the process, they stored up judgment for themselves (Rom. 2:5) while they abused God’s kindness to them. But their misuse of God’s goodness did not restrain His generous provisions to them. Even Jesus took note of this when He taught

about love for neighbors—and enemies, saying, “He [God] causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good...So love *your* enemies...” (Matt. 5:43ff).

Biblical youth counselors need to recognize that they are in a position to love the rebellious, indifferent, angry adolescents in front of them. One way to do this is to begin with the teen’s “wise wants” and show him how to satisfy these wants. Conversely, we can also love them by showing them how their poor choices can lead to more of the loss, pain, or trouble they are experiencing—just the opposite of what they want—“ruin” or a life that is “hard” (Prov. 13:15). God uses our good works (our helpful counsel), along with His own acts of kindness (John 6:35-38), to lead people to repentance and to show them His glory (Rom. 2:4; Matt. 6:16).

#### **Draw Attention to “Exceptions”**

When a teen realizes how he can get what he wants, he is often willing to put himself through a great deal of trouble to get it. Therefore, the strategies a counselor uses to effect change in a young person will be most productive if these strategies grow out of the teen’s own experiences and goals. Counselors can help a teen identify wise things he’s done in the past, by God’s common grace, that have produced some of what he wisely wants. These “exceptions” are different, biblically-wise things he has said or done in the past that have produced more favorable outcomes than the ones he is getting now. Often these past situations involve some of the same people or events in his present situation.

For example, in the past Tara talked respectfully to her mom and enjoyed the privileges of going out with her friends. Now she’s grounded. In the past Jared did his homework and was able to play basketball. Now he’s ineligible. In the past Seth kept his room clean, came in on time, and helped his dad with work around the house. As a result he had a great relationship with his dad. Now they fight all the time. In the past Dana showed interest in other new students in school and made friends. Now she’s lonely.

Drawing attention to exceptions like these can shift the counseling from being problem-centered to being solution-centered. By doing

this, the counselor sees the big picture of human nature, as Proverbs does. He talks to the teen about solutions in light of the young person's identity as one created in the image of God with life experiences he can draw upon. These solutions typically yield rapid change and movement toward the teen's goals because they are his own ideas about what has helped him get what he has wanted in the past. Most important, though, a solutions approach allows the counselor to be positive and affirming to the teen without being patronizing or manipulative. Godly youth counselors can genuinely recognize commendable qualities in students—their wise wants and their wise exceptions. This commonly produces trust and a close relationship with the counselor, which sets the stage for the most important counseling yet to be done: movement beyond this focus on self toward matters of the heart (idolatry, repentance, submission to Christ, and a life of faith and worship).

Most counseling and confrontation with angry young people focus on the teens' negative behavior. This "wise-wants," solution-oriented approach avoids the defensiveness, blame shifting, and turned-off feeling of teenagers suddenly confronted with their sin. It does not overlook or minimize sin, which must eventually be addressed. But getting to heart issues can start from the outside—with the concerns of the young person.

Is this the old Rogerian, self-sufficient, "I have the answers to all my problems within me" anthropology? No. The "wisdom of the organism" (Roger's term) will never be sufficient to stand the weight of the troubles of this life or of the life to come. Counselors can acknowledge that the teen, by God's common grace, has made some wise choices in the past and can use these past experiences to point the teen toward true freedom.

The uncommon nature of this approach to teens often catches them off guard. Their typical resistance and knee-jerk reaction to adult counsel—even nice, loving confrontation—disappears. Now they are forced to think about their choices and not about "the enemy." Teens realize that the counselor is not the enemy talking to them, and you are commending them, not condemning them. You are not trying to

change them. You are identifying the wise wants of students, who will sense that you are going to help them to be discerning about how to fulfill their wise desires. You do not minimize sin. You simply wait until the teen appears to have ears to hear, when your ideas are more likely to be heard—after rapport and trust have been built between you and the young person. "The tongue of the wise commends knowledge..." (Prov. 15:2) and "A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction" (Prov. 16:23).

### **Temporal Consequences: The Sages' Cache of Weapons for Change**

Wholeness will only come to a young person as his heart is transformed and as he seeks first the kingdom of God. But to get him to that deep spiritual place, the sages of Proverbs offer nearly 700 examples of positive and negative temporal consequences for wise or foolish decisions. The true "beginning" or principal part of wisdom is the "fear of the LORD" (Prov. 9:10). But there are degrees of wise living that even dumb animals and insects such as ants, coney, locusts, and lizards exhibit (Prov. 30: 24-28). Similarly, young people, even unbelieving ones, can practice some degree of wise living that will come back to reward them (Prov. 9:12) and may lead them to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

### **Case Summary**

In the following case summary, the counselor listens for what the teen does not want (the problem), clarifies what she wisely does want (wise wants—the goal), looks for exceptions (immediate, temporal solutions), helps her plan her choices (her "wise" strategy), then leads her thinking toward her own heart needs. The setting is a Christian school guidance office, but could just as easily be a restaurant or ball game with a youth leader, parent, or pastor.

Judy, a sophomore, had just transferred to our school from another school on the other side of the country. I had gotten to know Judy a little when I helped schedule her classes.

Judy stormed into the Guidance Center.

**She's so unfair! She takes points off for**

my geometry homework even when I get the right answers. I don't understand why she's so picky. I do the problems the way I was taught in my last school and I get the right answer. But that's not good enough for Mrs. Smith. She wants things done her way only. That's not right!

*You're pretty upset about this aren't you, Judy?*

**Yeah.** She is so unreasonable. My last geometry teacher taught us to do it a different way and I understand it. It makes more sense than the way she wants us to do it. But she won't let me do it my way—even though I get the right answer.”

*You don't have to do it her way, Judy.*

**I don't?”**

*No, you can do the problems your way. In fact you don't have to do the problems at all, if you don't want to.*

**I don't?**

Judy paused a few seconds. Then, as though she recognized that there would be a price to pay for doing it her own way, Judy said,

**Yeah, but she'll take points off and I want to get a good grade in geometry.**

*Yes, she probably will take points off.*

**But that's not fair. She shouldn't be able to do that.**

*Maybe she shouldn't, but can you control that?*

**No, I can't.**

*So you have a choice. You can do the work the way Mrs. Smith wants it done and earn the points or you can refuse to do it Mrs. Smith's way and have points taken off.*

**But that's not fair!**

*Maybe not. But what do you want me to do?*

**Change Mrs. Smith.**

*Me? Change her? Who am I? Teachers are in charge of their own classroom procedures. I have no authority in her teaching. The principal won't make a teacher change his or her teaching methods as long as nothing is wrong with what she is doing.*

**Yeah, but my grade will go down.**

*That's probably true. So, Judy, what do you want? It sounds like you've identified two ways things can go: you can get points by doing it her way and earn a stronger grade, or you can lose points and earn a weaker grade by doing it your way. What do you think you want to do? You can do whatever you want.*

Judy thought over her options. While she was mulling things over, I said,

*Judy, have you ever been in a situation where you've chosen to do something someone in authority wanted you to do, even though you wanted to do something different?*

**Yes, I think so.**

*Tell me about it.*

**Yeah.** My dad wanted me to clean my room before I could watch TV the other night. I wanted to wait until the next day to clean my room, but I did it when he said to so I could watch my favorite show.

*How did that work out for you, Judy?*

**Well, because I did what he said, he let me watch the show. Even more surprising, my dad watched it with me and was pretty cool about it.**

*So, how did you do that? I mean, what were you thinking that helped you to do what you didn't want to do?*

**I wanted to watch TV. Cleaning my room was the only way that was going to happen.**

*So you reminded yourself of the outcomes. That helped you get past your own preference to clean your room when it was more convenient for you, and to clean it when your dad wanted it to be done?*

**Yeah, I guess so.**

*That sounds pretty wise to me, Judy. You looked at the outcome you wanted to achieve and you made up your mind, even though you didn't feel like it, to do what your dad wanted.*

**I suppose that's what I did.**

*You didn't have to clean your room at that time, did you? But you did it because you were aiming for a goal. Right?*

**Yes. That's right.**

*I wonder what would happen if you thought that way about Mrs. Smith's geometry class—if you reminded yourself of your goal. There's nothing spiritual about the way to solve a geometry problem, right? But one way, the teacher's way, might be wisest and help you get you what you want in that class.*

**I hadn't thought of it like that.**

*Well, why not experiment with it and see what happens? Remind yourself of your goal in that class—to pass with a good grade—and what you can do to get to that goal. That's what you did with your dad, right?*

**I can do that.**

*Give it a whirl and see what happens. Talk to yourself about your goals when you sit down to do homework and see if that makes it easier to do things the way Mrs. Smith wants them done.*

Judy left upbeat, hopeful, and with a sense of control about her math situation. She thanked

**I don't know.**

*Judy, a while back you told me that you know the Lord. Tell me about your relationship with Christ. How important is it to you?*

From this point on in the conversation, I had the opportunity to explore the effect that Judy's professed relationship with Christ had on her motives and actions. We talked about the sins of stubbornness and willfulness, the reason for honoring those in authority, and how to disagree with authority figures respectfully. Judy's "wise want" to succeed fueled the initial interchange between Judy and me, but it also led to her willingness to consider heart matters.

Youth workers can substitute any number of things they hear from teens for Mrs. Smith's "unreasonable" geometry requirement: Mom and Dad's restriction of phone use, instant messaging, or computer time; Dad's refusal to let his son use the car when his homework is not done, being grounded if she doesn't come in

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me for taking the time and said she'd let me know what happened.

The next day I looked Judy up and we talked about math class. Judy said she had reminded herself about her goal and had done the homework the way Mrs. Smith wanted it to be done. And she gained the full credit lost in earlier assignments.

### **The Heart of the Situation**

The connection I had made with Judy allowed me to move to the next level of her motivation—her heart. We continued our discussion.

*Judy, may I change the subject a little?*

**Sure.**

*This is a kind of personal question, and if you'd rather not answer it, just say so and I'll exit quickly. Do you think there's a deeper reason why you eventually cleaned your room for your dad and why you responded to Mrs. Smith's directions about homework?*

when she's told to; getting detentions when he is late for school lots of mornings; being blamed by the teacher for disrupting class—even when he's not the one making noise. The list goes on.

No matter what the issue, after a counselor connects with a teen by talking about his or her goals, he can focus on solutions mined from the teen's own past experiences, but then move counseling toward the heart needs that God says must be addressed.

This all may not happen in one meeting, but our church and Christian school contexts allow counseling to be an ongoing informal relationship. Everything does not have to be said all at one time. Jesus modeled this pacing with His disciples. He said, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear" (John 16:12). In short, this outside-to-the-inside pattern, as people have ears to hear, seems to be God's pattern of working with spiritually indifferent or self-absorbed people—especially youth.