

ISAIAH 9:6.

For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us,
and the government will be on his shoulders—
and his name will be
Wonderful,
Counselor,
God the Champion,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

We adults usually think that it's a child's job to learn from us who are older. But every so often they remind us that the oldest and wisest of us can still learn from a child. A news website once published an article consisting of kids' handwritten notes. One six-year-old girl answered the question, "What is love?" this way: "Love is when you're missing some of your teeth but you're not afraid to smile because you know your friends will still love you even though some of you is missing." A better definition of love than many adults would give!

I also read once that a mother asked her seven-year-old boy if he wanted some more toys, and he told her, "I have plenty of toys. You and Dad should just save your money in case you need more later."

And a first grade teacher was once reading some handwritten notes from her students out loud on the last day of school. She started to get emotional and teary, and said to them, "I'm sorry. I'm having a hard time reading."

To which one of her students piped up, "Just sound it out!"

It is probably true that, in general, parents and adults give better advice to children than children do to parents. But as we continue going through Isaiah 9:6 on Christmas Day, as we have for several Christmases now, Isaiah tells us that one of the names that God has given to this child and son whom he has given to us is the name Counselor.

1.

The first reason this child is called Counselor is because his counsel and advice is always reliable and trustworthy. Think about it. When someone has a nickname, it only sticks if it truly applies to that person, either genuinely or ironically. I grew up in a household of boys, and nicknames abounded. There were names like "the Clutz," "Smellyman," "Bo Jangles," and "the Wrecker." I'll leave it to you to guess which of those was mine. The point is, there was a story behind all of them. The reason those names stuck for a time is because they fit.

So when baby Jesus is named Counselor, there's only one of two possibilities. Either he is named Counselor ironically, because he's always giving advice that is notorious for failing, like when a slow person is called Wheels or a huge person is called Slim or a bald man is called Curly. Or it's because the name genuinely fits and he's known for giving good advice. And we know from experience that it's the second reason.

But even when people are really good at giving advice, they still have their bad days. The old Dear Abby columns sometimes had some real clunkers. Sometimes people wish they could get every dime back that they spent on their counseling sessions. Many times I and other pastors

will finish talking to a person and then think, “O you dummy! Why didn’t you say *this*? You should have said *that*!” One of Martin Luther’s friends, George Spalatin, was well regarded for his good advice. One time a pastor, whose wife and father-in-law had died, asked Spalatin about the possibility of taking his deceased wife’s stepmother as his new wife. Spalatin gave him his advice on the matter, and then later had serious regrets about the advice he gave and sank into a deep depression. Many pastors and advisers and counselors know what that feels like. Someone can be known as a counselor, but that doesn’t make them perfect.

But with this child, with this Counselor, it’s different. You can always take his advice to the bank. His counsel, which is his Word, has never once failed those who have understood it correctly and taken it to heart. There isn’t going to be anyone on Judgment Day who will be able to say, “But what you said just didn’t work!” If Jesus’ advice seems to fail someone, it’s because they either weren’t listening carefully to it or because they didn’t take it to heart.

So this baby lying in the manger is called Counselor not just because his advice is trustworthy, but because it is *always* so without fail.

2.

He is also called Counselor because of the extent of the advice and the kind of advice he gives. You know as well as I that just because someone is a counselor doesn’t necessarily mean that they are qualified to give advice about everything. That’s why there are financial advisors, trip advisors or travel agents, sales consultants, guidance counselors, marriage counselors, and so on.

Jesus doesn’t give exact answers for every last little situation you encounter in life, but his advice does cover a very broad spectrum so that, if you are thoroughly familiar with his counsel, which is his Word, you are able to make wise decisions on your own about a whole host of things without needing to consult anyone else.

But even though his Word does advise us, for instance, about our use of finances and our choice of spouse, it is best known for how it answers the deeper questions we have and for how it helps us to carry the cross. The apostle Peter told Jesus, “Lord, you have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

For instance, what Jesus tells us about human nature and human sin alone helps us to answer a lot of the “Why?” questions that we have. Why is it that activities that were regarded as sin half a century ago are now lauded as virtues? Why is it that this horrible shooting happened, or that that terrible bombing happened, or that this person picks on me or treats me rotten? Why is it that those in power tend to abuse it and use it selfishly? Why is it that I so often do what I do not want to do, that I often act against better knowledge? Jesus answers those questions by telling us the truth about who all human beings are—sinful creatures that are turned away from God by nature.

But he doesn’t leave us there. Is there life after death? What possibilities are there in the afterlife? How do I make sure that I end up in a good place and not in a bad one, especially if I am a sinful creature turned away from God by nature? Jesus answers these questions too. In fact, we see him as a baby lying in a manger precisely because he came to be the answer to those questions for us. He tells us that an eternity does await all people—an eternity either of bliss in heaven or of torment in hell. He tells us that he came to save us so that we would not perish, but

have eternal life. He came to be not just an innocent little baby, but an innocent little toddler, an innocent little boy, an innocent teenager, an innocent young man, an innocent adult, and to be those things in our place. He came to exchange the wood of the manger for the wood of the cross, that he might pay for all of our sin and wickedness. He came not only to undergo birth, but to undergo death, and defeat it—all for us.

Oftentimes a counselor's job is simply to enable you to help yourself, to point you down the right path. And sometimes we treat Jesus like that kind of counselor too, especially when we quote that often misquoted passage, "God helps those who help themselves." That's a misquoted passage, because it's not even a passage. It does not exist anywhere in Jesus's counsel.

Jesus's counsel is better than that. His counsel doesn't just get us started on the right path. His counsel doesn't help those who help themselves. His counsel helps the helpless. His counsel actually saves us, by convincing us of the good news that heaven has already been opened to us, that our sins have already been paid for, that everything that needed to be done for us has been done.

But of course until we actually inherit eternal life, there is a life here on earth to live. And that life is difficult. We reviewed that last year when we talked about Jesus's name, Wonderful. He is called Wonderful, in part, because of the wonderful—we might even say *crazy*—way he rules his Church, concealing it beneath the cross and suffering so that it doesn't look like the only true, saving church to people who don't pay attention to his Word, and it often doesn't look that way to us either.

That is why we also need him to counsel us in the many difficulties we encounter both without and within on this side of eternity.

He first of all comforts us with his counsel by assuring us that these difficulties will happen. If we had to struggle and wrestle with and endure this and that as Christians, and all Jesus said in his Word was, "If you believe in me, you won't have any trouble," then his counsel would be worthless to us. But instead he tells us the truth: "In this world, you will have trouble" (John 16:33).

He comforts us with his counsel, second, by telling us that whatever bad experiences we have because we are Christians aren't really aimed at us, but at Christ. For example, Jesus says, "Whoever listens to you listens to *me*; whoever rejects you rejects *me*; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16). And he says, "Whoever touches you touches the apple of *my eye*" (Zechariah 2:8). And he says, "If you were of the world, then the world would love you as its own. But since you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, *that is why* the world hates you" (John 15:19). And he says, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kind of evil against you *because of me*" (Matthew 5:11).

If we were to forget this, we would almost have to despair. In 1529, Martin Luther forgot this. Church and Communion attendance were dropping off and people were being stingy in supporting the gospel and its preachers. By January of 1530, he had had enough. He simply stopped preaching to them. After preaching at least 121 times in 1529, he preached only five times from January to October in 1530. Why? Because he was taking it all personally, as if it were all aimed at him and his preaching, and that burden was too much for him. But it wasn't aimed at him. And once Luther realized that, he resumed his preaching. He held on to this counsel from Christ, that it really wasn't being done to him, but to Christ.

So too, when those in authority define marriage in a way that seems to attack us, that isn't being done to us, but to Christ. When your siblings or children stop going to church and listening to God's Word in spite of your loving encouragements and warnings, that isn't an attack on you, it's an attack on Christ. I recently read about a Christian university student who was given a failing grade for maintaining what the Bible says about God making humans male and female in Genesis 1. And a lot of people in the comments said similar things happened to them, sometimes decades ago. Those weren't attacks on them; they were attacks on Christ. When you get made fun of for believing that Jesus is the only way to heaven and all those who don't believe in him will go to hell, they really aren't making fun of you, but of Christ. If you have thin skin or a weak heart or narrow shoulders, that's okay, because it's not aimed at your skin, heart, and shoulders, but at Christ's, and he can handle it.

He comforts us with his counsel, third, when we are plagued by our own consciences. He says, "Cheer up, son, daughter, your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). He says that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). He points us to our baptism and says, "Baptism saves you. It is the pledge of a good conscience towards God" (1 Peter 3:21). He invites you to his table and gives you his body and blood and says, "Here, take this. This is for the forgiveness of your sins" (Matthew 26:26–28). He comforts you not only by reminding you of his name, Jesus, which means Savior, and his name Counselor, but also by reminding you of the devil's name, which means *liar* or *false accuser*. In Christ, Satan cannot accuse you of any sin, because in Christ, you are sinless. That is counsel that the devil has no answer for.

And finally, he comforts us with his counsel when we are troubled or grieving and sad. When a loved one dies in the Lord, whether prematurely or old and full of years, he tells us that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil (Isaiah 57:1). When we are worried and paralyzed with stress, he tells us to cast all our cares on him because his only care is for us (1 Peter 5:7), and he tells us to look and see how the birds and the flowers and the grass are well taken care of, even though he loves us so much more (Matthew 6:25–34). He tells us that all things are working together for good for those who love him (Romans 8:28), and his own suffering and death, the greatest tragedy of all and the greatest blessing of all, stand there for all time as irrefutable proof.

Friends, maybe you wouldn't go to a child for advice. And normally, that would be a wise course of action. But here is a baby to whom you can go, to whom you must go, a child, a son, God's child and son, given to be your child and son, whose advice and counsel will never let you down. He doesn't have an hourly rate. There's no waiting line. His counsel is offered to one and all, all at the same time and all for free.

This Christmas and throughout the new year, don't leave his counsel to collect dust on the shelf. Don't let others benefit from his counsel at church while you sit at home. Consult him and be advised by him. His counsel will help you through this life and will usher you into the next.

So go ahead, approach the manger and open the gift: "Ah, a Counselor! Not necessarily what I wanted, but exactly what I needed." Merry Christmas, from God to you! Amen.