

Coaching – A Biblical Perspective

Is Coaching Biblical? Can we find examples of it in the Bible? Were there any Life Coaches in the Bible? Can we find the coaching model being used in Jesus's ministry? These are the types of questions we are often asked, and that we will strive to answer here.

What Is Coaching?

The focus here is on life and personal development coaching, not athletic coaching. Simply stated, coaching is empowering people to change without telling them what to do. It involves deep listening and provocative questions in a goal-oriented relationship with a person who is internally motivated to make changes that are important to them. Typically the person is in some sort of transition or on the verge of making a major change in their life, and often they are facing some sort of obstacle that is hindering them from moving forward. At the core of the coaching model are these: asking, listening, guiding, providing support, encouraging and accountability for actions taken to move forward in the face of obstacles.

Scriptural Examples of the Coach Approach

The *coach approach* evolves out of asking open-ended questions to probe, expand, and focus the thinking of the person you are coaching. Already in Genesis 3 we find God asking Adam and Eve three probing questions: "Where are you? Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" God already knew the answers, but He also knew that in order for Adam and Eve to grow in their understanding of their relationship with Him, they needed to think about and take responsibility for their choices. God was challenging them to follow Him from the heart, and heart transformation requires an internal motivation to change, not just external commands. God asked, listened to their responses, guided them toward a solution and helped them overcome the obstacles they were facing. He made atonement for their sin by killing an animal and provided clothing to cover their nakedness.

The *coach approach* includes using open-ended questions to get people to stop in their tracks and think about what they are doing and where they are headed. As you journey through the Old Testament, you often find God using questions for this "stop and think" purpose. Here are a few examples:

- **Moses** – when he was refusing God's job offer for him to lead Israel out of Egyptian bondage. *"Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses and he said, "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well." Exodus 4:14.*
- **Joshua** - when he thought the Israelites would be conquered by the Amorites. *"The LORD said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Joshua 7:10.*
- **Samuel** - when he continued to mourn over Saul. *"The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? 1 Samuel 16:1*
- **Isaiah** - when he was deciding whether to answer God's call to prophesy to his own people. *"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" Isaiah 6:8*

- **Jeremiah** - when he was deciding whether to answer God's call to prophesy to the nations. "*The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?" "I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied.*" Jeremiah 1:11

This pattern is repeated throughout the Old Testament, but it's not until we encounter the life of Jesus that we truly begin to see the power of the coaching model being used to motivate and develop others, including leaders.

We refer to the coaching process as a *coaching conversation*. It didn't seem to matter with whom Jesus was conversing, He always had a question for them. Matthew records 65 questions; Mark, 45; Luke, 73; John, 45. Jesus wasn't seeking a correct intellectual answer. Each of the questions He asked challenged the person to stop and think about something that had life-changing implications. It wasn't the verbal response given, but the change in life direction that mattered. For example, imagine that He is asking you each of the following:

- *Why are you afraid, you of little faith?* Matt. 8:26
- *Do you believe that I am able to do this?* Matt. 9:28
- *How many loaves do you have?* Matt. 15:34
- *But who do you say that I am?* Matt. 16:15
- *What do you want me to do for you?* Matt. 20:32
- *Do you not yet understand?* Mark 8:21
- *For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?* Mark 8:36-37
- *Why are you putting me to the test?* Mark 12:15
- *If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?* Luke 6:32
- *Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?* Luke 6:41
- *If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!* Luke 11:13
- *And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?* Luke 12:25
- *Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?* Luke 24:38
- *Have you anything here to eat?* Luke 24:41
- *Do you want to be made well?* John 5:6
- *Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?* Jn. 6:5
- *Simon son of John, do you love me?* John 21:16
- *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* Acts 9:4

One of the most profound questions is asked of God when Jesus is on the cross: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Matt. 27:46) Matthew tells us that He "cried out in a loud voice." God knew His heart, so it would seem that even in this traumatic moment, Jesus wanted everyone there and everyone who would later read Matthew's account to stop and think about the implications that His death has for their future life. Good question! Why did God forsake Jesus at the moment of His death?

There are a number of stories in Scripture where Jesus uses the *coach approach* to affect spiritual transformation. Here are two:

1. The first is found in Luke 24. It serves as a powerful example of how Jesus helps people to change without telling them what to do.

After the crucifixion and resurrection, two disciples were walking from Jerusalem to their home in Emmaus. Notice how Jesus coaches these two followers back into joy and their mission. He joins them on the road and asks a simple question: *What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?* We read that “they stood still, looking sad.” With that simple probing question, Jesus was asking, “Do you hear what you’re saying? Do you know how your perception of reality has affected your speech?” It’s a great coaching question because when our perspective is skewed or based on something that isn’t true, it affects everything. Those disciples thought that the “Hope of Israel” was dead, and their hopes had died with Him.

Jesus listened to them long enough to discover that the recent events in Jerusalem had severely shaken their beliefs. Then he asked another question, *Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?* They knew about the suffering Messiah prophesied by Isaiah, but they hadn’t connected the dots yet. Jesus helped them to realign their beliefs with reality so they could get back to their original mission: *You are witnesses of these things.*

Imagine all of the other responses Jesus could have made in this situation. He could have used shame, guilt, duty, obligation, command, brow-beating, etc. But he knew two things: their hearts were fragile, and they had to be persuaded from the inside out in order to re-engage in their mission. They needed to be transformed, and Jesus knew that true change comes from within.

We see Jesus using the power of questions, deep listening, support, encouragement and the skill of guiding these disciples back on to their critical path. We could say more about Jesus’ ability to listen, but the fact is self-evident. No one listened more intently to people than Jesus. Listening values a person. It honors their existence like nothing else. Asking and listening demonstrate that we believe in the other person. Notice, He didn’t tell them to do anything. There are no commands in this story. There are no “should-have’s,” “you-better-or-else,” “shame on you,” or any number of other tactics we often use to get people to do what we want them to do.

Jesus motivated these disciples to do what they had already committed to do. And then He asked them if they had anything to eat. In fact, it was in their common meal that their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus had been talking to them. But first, He used open-ended questions and listening to help them get un-stuck and gain a fresh perspective based on the truth. Then he offered them encouragement to re-engage with their heart’s true desire: *“to be witnesses of these things.”* That’s good coaching!

2. The second story is found in John 21, and it involves Peter, the leader of the disciples. This story is similar to the first in that it demonstrates how Jesus “coached” his disciples to redirect their thoughts and actions. As the story opens we find Peter, their leader, misleading the disciples back to fishing, not forward into their assigned mission. Let’s see how Jesus responds.

Jesus had instructed the disciples to wait for Him at the Sea of Tiberias, but they were growing weary of waiting. What happens we get tired of waiting? We start looking around for Plan B. For the disciples, Plan B involved going back to what they knew best – fishing. Peter says, “I’m going out to fish.” The others responded, “We’ll go with you.” But a problem had emerged. Try as they would, they couldn’t catch anything.

Jesus enters the story from the shadows on the shore with what some feel is a humorous question: *Children (Friends in the NIV), you do not have any fish, do you?* They had been distracted away from their critical path, and Jesus was inviting them to think more deeply about the implications of their decision. Jesus, the Master Fisher of Men, was about to gently “reel them in” when they seemed to be “pulling out.”

The way Jesus helps them change their perspectives and their direction is intriguing. First, he redirects their fishing efforts to the other side of the boat, and they experience remarkable success. It was a “follow Me” teachable moment, but it took a while for them to begin to grasp it’s significance. Then the disciple “whom Jesus loved” tells

Peter, "It is the Lord," and the coach approach begins to bear fruit. For one thing, Jesus cooked them a good breakfast and invited them to join Him on shore. Hospitality breaks down barriers. We can be sure that He listened intently to their conversation around the early morning fire and watched their body language as they no doubt squirmed a bit under His penetrating gaze. But Jesus never reprimanded them, never condemned their behavior or their motives. He never used guilt and shame to beat them back into shape. Instead, He showed them genuine hospitality and gave them the gift of his listening and loving presence.

It's amazing to read how Jesus engages Peter, the presumed leader who earlier had misled the disciples away from their mission and back to fishing. What would you have said to Peter? What do you think Peter was expecting Jesus to say? This is probably the first time that Jesus and Peter had talked together after his three denials just before Jesus' crucifixion. If you were Peter, what would have expected? How about: "Wow Peter, way to go! What do you mean you don't know me? How could you have said such a stupid thing? You're not a leader, you're a coward, and the crowing of the rooster proved it! I don't think you have what it takes to follow me. I've had enough of you. You're fired."

But Jesus took a completely different tack; He took the coach approach. He asked an honest question that went to the heart of what Peter needed to grapple with. After all, love was at the center of Jesus' relationship with His disciples, and Peter knew it. Jesus asked a simple probing question: "*Peter, do you love me?*" He didn't accuse Peter of anything. He didn't penalize him for denying Him. He didn't cut his pay. He didn't suspend him from the team. He didn't scold him for being a bad influence on the rest of the disciples. He simply invited him back into a right relationship by going to the heart of the issue. If love covers a multitude of sins, then for sure it covered Peter's denials. All three of them. If the blood of the Messiah poured out on the Jerusalem garbage dump really was the full atonement for the sin of the world, then Peter could confidently come clean before Jesus and tell him the truth. And the truth was that Peter really did love Jesus. How do we know? Because Jesus reinstated Peter, accepted his answers and re-commissioned him to his original call: "follow me."

And Peter did follow Jesus. All the way to a martyr's death, so we're told by the historian Josephus. Evidence of Peter's transformation can be found many years later when Peter wrote, *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you.* (1 Peter 5:6-7) Where do you think Peter learned that? During breakfast on the beach? In that talk with Jesus after breakfast? If so, that's true life transformation that was facilitated by the coach approach that characterized Jesus' entire ministry.

Both of these stories are profound examples of the power of coaching: asking, listening, guiding, supporting, encouraging and holding people accountable. Receiving information and advice does not cause transformation. It requires renewal from within as the Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 12:2 ...

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will.*

Is Coaching Biblical? Can we find examples of it in the Bible? Were there any Life Coaches in the Bible? Can we find the coaching model being used in Jesus's ministry? We rest our case.

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