

## CODEPENDENCY & ENABLING PRODIGAL MESSAGE #9

### Memory verse of the week:

**Galatians 6:7 ESV: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”**

*Susan was a mom who walked through the doors of the Prodigal Ministry one evening. She didn't have to tell anyone about her pain and weariness as such burdens were apparent from her countenance. As Susan began to share her story in the newcomer group, she openly revealed the challenges that she had with her prodigal son, who was then 23 and had barely graduated high school. Susan discovered that the issues her son had in high school with pot had escalated during his first year in college to more widespread drug abuse and other poor and harmful decisions. Typically—and understandably—Susan was focused was on “fixing” her son.*

*As she began to move through the Prodigal curriculum and group time, Susan heard time and again about the principles that would give her hope and allow her to make the decisions that would allow her to enjoy abundant life and freedom. However, week after week rolled along and though Susan verbally acknowledged the truths that she was hearing, she began to push back more and more and would never execute a plan to establish boundaries, enact consequences, and find peace in the midst of her prodigal chaos.*

*In her Prodigal closed group, it was eventually uncovered that Susan and her husband had a bad marriage. Susan began to hint that her husband was abusive and had been excessively drinking over the past few years. Furthermore, her job was becoming a burden and her performance reviews were getting worse. Her husband was complaining that “he had no partner,” since she was so consumed with her son and his issues. Frustrated, Susan explained that nobody understood her situation and that she had to take care of her son!*

*Susan couldn't explain the reasons why she was struggling to do the hard things that her group—based on biblical wisdom—was asking her to do. One night, a loving friend in her closed group asked her, “Susan, what if you do the things that you need to do and your son gets well? Could it be that you are fearful that your life may still be a mess and you will then have to deal with your own issues? Susan, can you define where you truly find your value and hope?”*

### Introduction

Simply stated, to base our self-worth upon other people's success or even upon a relationship itself is pathological *codependency*. We cannot be healthy if we find our value in how we relate to other people. Such codependency is often unhealthy for the other person in the relationship as well, especially if that person is self-destructive, an addict, or a prodigal in any way. The only healthy self-evaluation that we can make is to realize that our identity and self-worth are based upon our relationship with Christ.

If we idolize a relationship, then we are prone to rescue the other person from the pain of the natural consequences of their behavior. Such actions enable that individual to continue their irresponsible and self-destructive patterns. This codependent cycle must be

broken in order to allow the prodigal to reap what they sow—that is, to experience the appropriate consequences, whether good or bad, of their actions.

A correct view of God will allow us to have a correct view of ourselves, which, in turn, will help us identify codependent situations and make healthy decisions. Enabling and “Christian love” may look very similar, but they can be distinguished by one’s motives and the fruits that are produced by one’s actions. Overall, battling the challenges of codependency and enabling comes down to a matter of the heart and trust in God.

### **Definitions:**

- **Codependency:**
  - It is the tendency to behave in overly passive or excessively caretaking ways that negatively impact one’s relationships and quality of life. Also, it often involves putting one’s own needs at a lower priority than others while being excessively preoccupied with the needs of others.
  - It is the idol worship of people, such as children, spouses, parents, or friends.
- **Enabling:**
  - It is a term with a double meaning. Enabling is used, in the context of problematic behavior, to signify approaches that are intended to help but, in fact, may perpetuate a problem.
  - A common theme of enabling is that third parties take responsibility, blame, or make accommodations for a person’s harmful conduct.

### **The law of reaping and sowing**

We learn volumes from our mistakes. If humans experience pain, then they rapidly learn to avoid it. The Bible explains it clearly in Galatians 6:7–8: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”

When we interrupt the law of reaping and sowing, we interrupt the proper feedback loop. In other words, we do not allow someone to experience the total consequences of their decisions and actions—whether good or bad, wise or foolish. How can someone fully understand that they made a poor decision if they are inhibited from seeing and experiencing the appropriate outcome of that poor decision?

The result of such a “rescue maneuver” is that one’s prodigal is allowed and enabled to continue in their irresponsible behavior—no consequences. If enabling continues farther, it introduces to the prodigal a false sense of reality, which leads to entitlement and perhaps even a “victim mentality.” Prodigals may begin to feel that they *deserve* to be rescued and that if they fail, then it is someone else’s fault! They can begin to feel that they don’t need God and, at times, that they actually *are God* since they escape unpleasant consequences over and over again.

### **Reasons for enabling**

If enabling is so detrimental to one’s relationships and one’s own life, then why do we do it? It is critical to understand the possible causes of enabling so that we can identify and correct them. There are several causes of enabling. Let’s examine the most common ones.

1. A lack of proper relationship with, understanding of, and trust in God
2. Codependency
  - A. A lack of a proper identity in Christ
  - B. Idol worship of one's prodigal, relationships, achievements, etc.
3. A misunderstanding of what true "love" looks like in its fullness
4. A need or desire for absolute control over a person, situation, etc.

It is critical to understand that we cannot control our prodigals. As long as we think that we have control over them, then we will be incapable of sustaining a proper relationship with them. We can only control *ourselves*.

A self-destructive prodigal situation, such as addiction, cannot continue for long unless someone *enables* it to continue. If an addict or alcoholic can be identified, then an enabler is sure to be close at hand. Thus, the Prodigal Ministry is designed to help the families and friends of prodigals by urging them to focus on controlling the only thing that they truly have any power over—themselves.

Therefore, it is important to remind ourselves of the biblical view of security. Many passages make this point, but Psalms 33:16–18 capsulizes it well: “The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue. Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.” In other words, we cannot “save” or “fix” other people, and we cannot depend upon our own power; we can only, by faith, depend upon the Lord as we faithfully follow and obey Him.

If enabling and its outcomes could be viewed abstractly and objectively, then few people would choose to continue enabling their prodigals. Enablers would never enable if they think through their prodigal situation clearly, being guided by the truth of God's Word. This may seem like a harsh statement, as enablers truly love their prodigals and only want what is best for them. Unfortunately, while their motives are usually pure, the outcomes of their enabling are only counter-productive and damaging. That is why one must identify the reasons for their enabling and make the necessary corrections.

### **Enabling vs. “Christian love”**

Understanding how to properly love someone is complex and much more difficult than it first appears. Most first impressions of love are all about emotions. When two people fall in love, they feel passion and desire to be with each other. After the emotions fade and reality sets in, however, relationships are much more difficult to maintain; this is because of individual selfishness and pride. Now, relationships are good for us, as everyone needs to be loved, encouraged, and served. We also need to be sharpened by our relationships. And such sharpening is tough, but it is absolutely essential if we are going to follow God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

If our Personal Mission Statement (PMS) is all about *us*, *our* successes, and *our* happiness, then we will want our relationships to serve *us* primarily. As believers, however, if we want our relationships to glorify God, then we must love others as God loves us. God is clear that sharpening, correcting, and disciplining others is a very loving thing to do. We are reminded of that in regard to marriage (Ephesians 5:22–33), parenting (Proverbs 19:18–19; Ephesians 6:4), and relationships with other believers (Proverbs 27:17). As we mentioned in our message on “Community” (Prodigal Message #7), if we are to glorify God, we must not only encourage one another but also teach, admonish, and

sharpen one another (1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Timothy 3:16–17). Using such means to point our friends and family to truth is a true act of Christian love as well as a kind, compassionate, and selfless act of service.

It is clear from Scripture that God loves us in just such a way. He tells us in Hebrews 12:5–11 that we should endure hardship as discipline, and that though discipline seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, later on, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Old Testament Israel was the perfect picture of a prodigal that God loved deeply. He punished them over and over for their recurring rebellion but was always quick to point out that He did so because He loved them and wanted a relationship with them.

One of the most dreadful things to consider is the alternative to God’s discipline. It is frightening to witness or experience the withdrawal of God’s care and correction. Take Proverbs 1:24–27 for example: “Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.” Thus, we should readily welcome God’s discipline in our own lives just as we should appropriately discipline our prodigals.

Furthermore, discipline is the key to raising godly children (Proverbs 19:18–19; 29:15, 17, 19, 21). And if we don’t clearly warn our prodigals of their impending doom but continue to enable their destructive behavior, then we will be partly responsible for their fall (see, for example, the parallel in Ezekiel 33:1–9). To look the other way and not discipline our prodigals when they deserve it is one of the most unloving and destructive things that we can do as parents. We should pray that God never stops disciplining us in love just as we should pray that we would do the same for our prodigals.

It is important, therefore, that we remind ourselves of the critical Prodigal paradigm, which is also a critical paradigm for any discipleship ministry: **Truth delivered without love will not be heard, but love given without truth is not love.** We *must* understand this concept fully and realize that truth and love added together do not total 100%. Some feel that as the amount of truth shared increases, somehow the amount of love conveyed gets diminished. On the contrary, as love increases, truth does not have to be put aside; truth and love must coexist in their fullness in order to maintain healthy relationships. They work together, not in competition.

$$100\% \text{ truth} + 100\% \text{ love} = 100\% \text{ proper relationship}$$

There is no doubt that, at times, codependency and enabling can look like Christian love—the love Christ Himself calls us to as we love others. At first glance, the two may be impossible to distinguish from one another. However, they can be distinguished (1) by one’s motives—that is, one’s heart condition—and the fruit that results from such motives, and (2) by who one perceives as being in control—that is, who sits on the throne of one’s life—and the fruit that results from such a perspective.

#### Heart condition

- Codependency and enabling
  - React without thought
  - Addictive

- Poor sense of boundaries
- Driven by emotion
- Joyless
- “If I can get them to need me, then I will feel good about myself.”
- Christianity
  - Proactive
  - Balanced, non-addictive
  - Boundaries well-defined
  - Driven by truth
  - Joyful
  - “I will act in a way that honors and glorifies God.”

#### Who sits on the throne?

- Codependency and enabling: **Self** on the throne
  - “If they are hurting, then I must have done something wrong.”
  - Anxious
  - Fear of others
    - Proverbs 29:25: “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.”
- Christianity: **God** on the throne
  - Discipline and pain are useful tools to grow people (Hebrews 12)
  - Peaceful and content
  - Fear of God
    - Psalm 27:1: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

#### **What fills your heart?**

St. Augustine’s famous quote speaks truth: “Thou hast created us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”<sup>1</sup> Our prodigals have a hole in their hearts that only God can fill. They may try to fill it with drugs, alcohol, sex, and other selfish pleasures, but none of those things will fit and fill that God-shaped emptiness. Therefore, we must—in love—allow them to reap what they sow and experience the pain of their poor choices. Such a stance toward our prodigals allows God to work in their lives and also allows them to realize that their true identity and deepest joy can only be found in Christ alone.

In Galatians 5:16–17, the Apostle Paul speaks of the choice that we all have concerning what we fill our hearts and minds with: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other.” As detailed below, Paul goes on, in verses 18–26, to articulate the outward results of filling our hearts and minds with things of the flesh (that is, sinful desires) versus things of the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 1.1.

**Flesh** (Galatians 5:19–21)

- Sexual immorality
- Impurity
- Sensuality
- Idolatry
- Sorcery
- Enmity
- Strife
- Jealousy
- Fits of anger
- Rivalries
- Dissensions
- Divisions
- Envy
- Drunkenness

**Spirit** (Galatians 5:22–24)

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness
- Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-control

Every one of us has the same hole in our hearts. We all have a choice of what to fill it with. We must be careful, therefore, not to fill that hole with our prodigals. We cannot strive to gain our joy and peace from our prodigals, their accomplishments, or their coming “home.” Such behaviors are exemplary of codependency, which leads to enabling that is unhealthy for us and unhelpful for our prodigals.

**Conclusion: The cure**

The cure for codependency and enabling is quite simple to understand yet incredibly difficult to embrace and live out. The cure is *a proper and precise trust in God*. If we can put God on the throne our lives and trust in Him and His Word, then His truth will guide us. When you trust God to act according to His nature, character, and promises, you are free to let your beloved prodigals reap what they sow. But, how do we trust God *consistently*? Information and knowledge help for a while, but prioritizing the pursuit of God is a matter of the *heart*—one’s innermost being. **We can consistently trust in, follow, and obey God only when we grasp His grace and love toward us.** When we are allowed to suffer the consequences of our actions, we have the best chance of being molded and shaped into responsible, God-fearing adults. Likewise, when we allow our prodigals to suffer the consequences of their actions, they have the best chance of coming to their senses and growing to become responsible, God-fearing adults themselves.

Consider the following:

1. God’s Word guides us.
2. Community sharpens us, encourages us, and allows us to apply the Word wisely to our lives.
3. Our pain and distress “exercise” our faith and helps us grow in our trust in God.

These three points allow us to know both God and ourselves better, and the result is that we discover—or rediscover—**our identity as beloved children of God in Christ**. Our identity in Christ is the key to every issue that we face in life; it gives us hope and assurance and it allows us to depend on the one truth that we can count on—God Himself. And so, we do not depend on any “idol,” not on our success, fame, or fortune,

nor on our prodigal husband, wife, daughter, son, mother, father, sister, brother, or friend. We are children of the King and, thus, do not need anything else to give us worth. We trust God and His plan alone; we reject codependency and prodigal enabling.

*Because Susan was asked questions by someone who had loved her consistently during her time in closed group, she was open to exploring the truth. As a result, Susan discovered that the chaos in her family was a smokescreen for the issues in her own life. She began to realize that she had no real control over her life and that her identity could only be found in God's love for her.*

*As she slowly embraced those realities, Susan could finally let her son go and allow God to deal with him by means of natural consequences. She started trusting God and she decided to deal with her marriage and job performance issues head on. She wanted to live a life for God instead of living for her own personal desires—or in flight of her own fears. As she began to realize her identity in Christ more fully, Susan began to experience the freedom to live boldly for Him and focus on her purpose of bringing glory to God through her marriage, her relationships, and her work ethic.*

*You could see the results, once again, by just looking at the joy in her face.*

## CLOSED GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Day 1

How would you define, in your own words, “codependency” and “enabling”?

### Day 2

List as many harmful results of codependency and enabling that you can think of.

### Day 3

List the reasons why we “enable” and try to “rescue” our prodigals.

Day 4

Describe, in your own words, what the following saying means: “Truth delivered without love will not be heard, but loving someone without truth is not love.”

Day 5

Describe how Christian love and codependency can look alike as well as how you can distinguish between them.

Day 6

What is the cure for codependency and enabling? Describe your journey thus far and where you are in battling codependency and enabling.

**NOTES**