**Co-Dependency**

**Prodigal Message 9**

**Memory Verse**

**Galations 6:7** *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows*

*A young mother was relating the story of her journey with her prodigal son. She spoke of regrets from a failed marriage and blamed her husband’s verbal abuse for significantly contributing to her son’s struggles. Her husband was an alcoholic, but in moments of transparency, she had her own set of issues with prescription pain medication. She had had an abortion in high school that very few people knew about and had not been faithful to her alcoholic ex-husband.*

*She described the relationship with her son as” perfect” until her husband divorced her when their son was 17 y/o. He was a promising athlete, as several D-1 schools were interested in his football talent. He began experimenting with drugs, which eventually led to a heroine addiction. Unfortunately, his addiction led to worsening grades and physical condition. His mother continued to let him live with her despite his verbal and even occasional physical abuse as he threatened suicide on occasion. He was admitted for overdose for the third time, causing her to come to Prodigal, which a co-worker had recommended. She said on her first night at Prodigal that she was at the end of her rope.*

*However her life was a roller coaster. She was joyous when her son was in rehab or nice to her but was devastated, fearful, and worn out when he relapsed and struggled. Her personal life was invisible, lost in the care and rescuing of her son. Despite absorbing the lessons and admitting the truths, in frustration, one night in closed group she told the group that she could not accept or follow the “program” offered by Prodigal, as her son’s life was on the line and if he died she could never forgive herself. Her life would be over.*

*(This story is compiled from several true stories to protect the families and to serve as a common example of co-dependency)*

**Introduction**

Simply stated, if we gain our self worth from other people’s success or even from the relationship itself, then we suffer from *Co-dependency.* As humans we can be pleased or saddened by the state of our relationships, but we can not be healthy if we find our *value or identity* in those relationships. Co-dependency is also 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 antidote to Co-dependency is to find our identity in and dependence on Jesus Christ.

If we “idolize” a relationship then we are prone to rescue a person from the pain of natural consequences of his/her behavior. Such action enables him or her to continue in irresponsible behavior. This Co-dependent cycle must be broken to allow the prodigal to reap what they sow. A correct view of God, will give us a correct view of our self, will help identify Co-dependent situations, and allow healthy decisions to be made. Enabling and Christian love look very similar, but can be distinguished by our motives and the fruits that are produced.

**Definitions:**

* **Co-Dependency:** 
  + Behavior in overly passive or excessively caretaking ways that negatively impact ones relationship and quality of life. It often involves putting one’s personal needs at a lower priority than others.
  + Placing people and relationships as idols (children, loved ones, spouses)
* **Enabling :**
  + Term with double meaning. In a negative sense, 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 contact

**The Law of Reaping and Sowing**

We learn volumes from our mistakes. If humans experience pain, they rapidly learn to avoid it. The Bible explains it clearly in Galations 6:7 *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature, will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*

When we interrupt the law of reaping and sowing, it interrupts the proper feedback loop. In other words, we do not allow the total consequences of decisions and actions to be fully experienced. How can someone fully understand that a decision was poor if they do not see and experience the poor outcome of that decision?

The result of such a rescue is that it enables the Prodigal to continue in irresponsible behavior. If enabling continues further, it introduces a false sense of reality for the Prodigal, leading to entitlement and even a “victim mentality”. Prodigals may begin to feel that they deserve to be rescued and if they fail, it is other people’s fault. Not only do they often feel they don’t need God, they may begin to feel that they actually are God, as they escape bad consequences over and over again.

**Reasons for Enabling (interfering with reaping /sowing)**

If enabling is so bad, why do we do it? Let’s explore the possibilities. First of all it is critical to understand that we can’t control the Prodigal. As long as we think we have control over our Prodigals we are incapable of the proper relationship with them. We can only control our self. It is important to remind ourselves of the Biblical view of security. Many passages make this point, but Psalms 127:1-3 says it well*. Unless the Lord builds the house, it’s builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, it’s watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain, you rise early and go to bed late, toiling for food to eat, for He grants sleep to those he loves.*

*See also* Psalms 33:16-18 , Proverbs 21:31

In a self-destructive Prodigal situation such as addiction, it cannot continue long unless someone allows it to continue through enabling*.* If an addict or alcoholic is identified, then an enabler is close at hand. The Prodigal ministry is designed to help the families of Prodigals by urging them to focus on controlling the only thing under their control, themselves.

If the outcome of enabling could be viewed abstractly and unemotionally, then few would chose to do so. *Enablers would never enable if they understood God’s Word in relation to relationships and trusted it fully*. That seems like a harsh statement, as enablers truly love their Prodigals and only want what is best for them. Their motives are pure and sincere, but serve often to justify their misguided actions.

It is critical to understand the possible causes of enabling in order to identify them and correct them. There are several causes of enabling. Lets examine the most common issues.

1. Lack of proper relationship with, understanding of, and Trust in God
2. Co-dependency
   1. Lack of proper identity in Christ
   2. Idol worship of Prodigal, relationships, achievements, etc…
3. Misunderstanding of what “love” should look like in all its fullness

**Is it Enabling or 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 we fall in love with someone, we are passionate and desire to be with them. However, after the emotion fades and reality sets in, relationships are much more difficult to maintain. They are difficult because of selfishness and pride. Relationships are good for us, as we all need to be loved, encouraged, and served. However, we also need to be sharpened. Such sharpening is tough, but absolutely necessary in order for us to follow God’s command to love our neighbor as our self.

If our mission statement is all about us, *our* successes, and *our* happiness, then we will want our relationships to serve us primarily. However, as believers, if we want our relationships to be about glorifying God, then we must love them as God loves us. God is clear that sharpening others and disciplining them is a very loving thing to do. We are reminded of that in marriage (Eph 5), in parenting (prov 19:18,19), and in relationships with other believers. (Prov.27:17). If we are to glorify God, we have seen clearly in our message on community that we are here to encourage each other, but also to teach, admonish, and sharpen one another.(I Thess 5:14, II Tim. 3:16) Pointing those we love to Truth through those means is as loving to them as a kind and compassionate act of selfless service.

It is clear from Scripture that this is how God loves us. He tells us in Hebrews 12:1-13 that we should endure hardship as discipline, and that no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but later on it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who will be trained by it. Israel is the perfect picture of a Prodigal that God loves deeply. He punishes them over and over for their rebellion, but is quick to point out that he does so because he loves them.

One of the most dreadful things to consider is the alternative to God’s discipline. It is scary to witness the withdrawal of God’s care and correction. Prov 1:24-27 (NIV) *"But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you--when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you."*

Discipline is key to raising Godly children. (Prov. 19:18,19, Prov. 29:15,17,19,21.) Furthermore, God states that unless we clearly warn a Prodigal of their impending doom and do nothing to enable it, we will be partly responsible for that fall. (Ezekiel 33:1-9) Looking the other way and not disciplining our children when they deserve it is one of the most unloving and destructive things we can do as parents. Pray God never stops disciplining us in love and pray we do the same for our Prodigals.

Therefore it is important to be reminded of a critical Prodigal paradigm that is also critical to any discipleship ministry. ***“Truth delivered without love will not be heard, but loving someone without Truth is not love.”*** It is important to understand this concept fully and realize that truth and love added together do not total 100%. Some feel that as truth is ramped up then somehow love is diminished. On the contrary, as love increases, truth does not have to be put aside. Truth and love must coexist in their fullness in healthy relationships. They work together, not in competition.

*100% truth + 100% love = 100% proper relationship.*

There is no doubt that at times Co-dependency can look like Christian brotherly love, the love Christ himself calls us to as we love our neighbor as our self. From the outside the two may be impossible to distinguish from each other. However, *they can be separated by both their motives ,(heart condition) and the fruit they produce.*

**Matter of the heart**

Co-dependency

* + Reacts without thought
  + Addictive
  + Poor sense of boundaries
  + If I can get them to need me then I will feel good about myself
  + Emotion driven
  + Joyless
* Christianity
  + Proactive
  + Balanced
  + Boundaries well defined
  + I will do it if it is honoring to God and will bring him glory
  + Truth driven
  + Joyful !

**Who Sits on the Throne?**

Co-dependency can also be contrasted with Christian love by who we see as being in control; ie…who sits on the throne. Either God sits on the throne or we do. We must make the choice. The fruits of that decision are outlined below.

* Co-dependency – Self on the throne
  + If they are hurting then I must have done something wrong
  + Anxiety is a clue
  + Fear of man
    - Prov 29:25 fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe
* Christianity- God on the throne
  + Discipline and pain are useful tools to grow people (Heb 12)
  + Peace is a clue
  + Fear of God
    - Psalm 27:1 The Lord is my light and my salvation---whom shall I fear. The Lord is my stronghold—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 heart is not quiet until it rests in Thee*. “ Our Prodigals have a hole in their hearts that only God can fill. They may try to fill it with drugs, sex, selfish pleasure, or the like. However, none of those will fit that God shaped emptiness. We must allow them lovingly to reap what they sew and experience the pain of those choices. Such a stance allows God to work in their lives and also allows them to realize their true identity and joy is found in Christ alone.

Galatians 5:16 speaks to the choice we all have of filling our hearts with either our fleshly human desires or the things of the Holy Spirit. *So I say live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other…*

Below is a comparison further detailed in Galatians of the outward fruits seen as a result of filling your heart with things of the flesh or of the Spirit.

* **Flesh** (Gal 5:19-21)
  + Sexual immorality
  + Impurity
  + Debauchery
  + Idolatry
  + Hatred
  + Discord, dissensions
  + Jealousy, envy
  + Fits of rage
  + Selfish ambition
  + Drunkeness
* **Spirit** (Gal 5: 22-23)
  + Love
  + Joy
  + Peace
  + Patience
  + Kindness
  + Goodness
  + Faithfulness
  + Gentleness
  + Self control

Each of us has the same hole in our hearts. We all have a choice of what to fill it with. We must be careful not to fill that hole in our own hearts with our Prodigals. We can’t try to gain our ultimate joy or personal worth from our Prodigals or their accomplishments. That is called Co-dependency and it leads to enabling behavior that is unhealthy for us and certainly not helpful for our Prodigals.

**The Cure for Co-Dependency/Enabling**

The cure for enabling and Co-dependency is a clear understanding of our true identity in Christ. The key of that understanding is to grasp the reality of Jesus Christ Himself, His sacrifice for us individually, and the reality of His resurrection and the assurance it gives. Tim Keller summarizes it well in his book, *Encounters with Jesus*.

*“Out of grateful joy and sheet desire to resemble, delight, and serve the one who saved us, we amend our lives with a new effectiveness. And on the other hand, the fears and anxieties and insecurities that haunted us begin to dissipate. Success and failure in our work, neither puffs us up nor devastates us. We are not driven by unhappiness over our looks, or our status—we are not deflated by criticism as we were before.* ***Our self-image rests in a love we can’t lose. “***

*You don’t hear a ton about my daughter, Molly, in Prodigal. I don’t love her anymore or less than my son. She is awesome by the way. She is kind, funny, driven, smart, compassionate and really a father’s dream. For most of you that know me, it comes as no surprise to hear that I am both emotional and a hopeless romantic. I tear up at the drop of the hat. Well, when my daughter was young, Don Henley wrote a song about his new baby daughter called Annabelle that moved me. It was beautiful and I couldn't’ help envision my own daughter every time the key line of the chorus rang out, “Sleep tight, Annabelle, you can always count on me. “*

*From the moment I heard it, I knew that I would begin to collect photos of my daughter and that one day I would put together a music video with those photos set to that song. I even slipped into her room as a teenager and took a photo of her sleeping. I could envision the final product clearly. As an amateur video producer I planned to dub over the name. I could hear it. “Sleep tight, Molly B, you can always count on me.” Perfect.*

*But I kept delaying it. Something, maybe even subconsciously, was unsettling. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. One day the eventuality happened. It was announced that my daughter was going to get married. I had to hurry to get the video ready before it was too late..but it never happened.*

*At one of the greatest celebrations of my life, not just Molly’s, I took center stage in Molly’s life one last time. She and I danced the classic father daughter dance, if you can call surprising everyone with a choreographed routine to Beyonce’, “classic! I then took the mic to make a final comment. As I passed the baton to my wonderful son in law, Tripp, I decided to tell the story of the never completed Annabelle video.*

*After doing so, I closed by saying that I finally figured out why I could never complete that video. I wrestled with it more and more as the wedding approached ,then it finally hit me that the message of that song w as totally untrue. She could not always count on me. As hard as I might try, I am human and imperfect and one day I knew I would disappoint. It was also the wrong message. No human can be counted on to always be there. That is a recipe for failure. I went on to say that the reason I had so much confidence in Tripp and joy in this marriage and in that moment was that I was sure that Tripp was a husband who would prioritize both he and Molly’s dependency on the only one who they could always count on. He would make sure that she could clearly visualize Jesus Christ as the only one she could depend on every time, and for eternity. “Sleep tight Molly B, you can always count on me*”.

We can all sleep tight if, as Keller says, ***our identity and dependence rests in a love we can’t lose.***

**For He is good. He inexplicably loves us. He is enough.**