

Life on Life: The Art of Personal Ministry 201
Class 14 – April 18, 2021
Identifying and Responding to Co-Dependency

The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted. Proverbs 29:25

I. What is Co-Dependency?

A. Examples

1. **The fearful daughter** whose angry father so harshly rebuked/beat her older brother that she avoided saying anything that might upset him. She continues as a 45 year old, always making peace, though it keeps her husband and oldest daughter from hearing how they affect the people around them negatively.
2. The **controlling son** who kept his siblings quiet during the day so their dad who slept in the daytime would not wake up and lash out at their mom. He continues trying to control all he can by working compulsively and by avoiding having children, much to his wife's chagrin.
3. The **"insecure" man** who needs constant reassurance by his wife because his mother constantly gave and withheld favor based on her mood. Her control through emotional withdrawal and "punishment" is said by counselors to *cause* him to need reassurance and to fear taking risks.
4. **The flirtatious or seductive woman** who tries to get noticed and admired by men while also keeping away from committed relationships *because* she got more positive feedback for her beauty than for anything else. She feels the need to be noticed and complimented, but fears being known and committed.

B. Socially or psychologically or in common use, "codependency" is when a person behaves in a certain "*dependent*" way out of a **felt need to control their environment or relationships**. In the socially common use of the term, a "co-dependent" person lacks the internal stability and appropriate autonomy which makes people free from feeling the "need" to manipulate others or to give into manipulation by others. This makes it hard for them to form healthy interdependent back-and-forth relationships. This lack of internal stability often shows up when the person was not well nurtured (e.g., neglect) or was controlled in unhealthy ways (e.g., abuse) while growing up. It often shows up in homes where substance abuse was an issue, a pattern that often repeats.

C. Spiritually, we use the term codependency because it is common phrase in our society describing numerous problematic belief, attitude and behavior patterns. Biblically minded Christians can help people identify those patterns and help them learn to instead respond biblically.

1. We hope to be compassionate for the suffering that people have endured at the hands of those who were responsible to raise and love them. We must not miss this on our way to helping them see the real issue at hand.
2. However, when addressing "codependency," we really are addressing sinful **idolatry**. Each example of codependency cited ultimately has as its core problem, **a lack of confidence in Christ. More specifically, a lack of confidence in the sufficiency of Christ to meet their needs, to love faithfully, to sovereignly direct the affairs of their life in a way that brings Him glory and will ultimately be seen as victory** (2 Cor. 2:14; 1 Cor. 10:13; Romans 8:28-29).

3. In each case, the “codependent” person is “dependent” on things like the following to avoid loneliness, failure or rejection (negative, avoidance-based motivation) or to make their life feel safe, happy, connected, etc. (positive, goal-based motivation).
 - a. Avoiding conflict or keeping others happy in order to purchase acceptance. *I won't indicate my thoughts or feelings so that they will stay attached to me.*
 - b. Dominating the environment, conversation, decisions, etc. *I want you to dress or act this way or this is the only reasonable option after all I have done.*
 - c. Pulling from others their approval, attention *I won't talk with you because you didn't come to my piano recital or send me a birthday remembrance...*
 - d. Performing or acquiescing to the controlling demands of others out of fear. *I try to do things well enough that I won't be criticized.*
4. Idolatry has two directions:
 - a. Codependency shows when a person treats as “little gods” the people whose favor they think they “need,” or behaves certain ways to avoid their displeasure.
 - b. Codependency shows when the codependent person does what they do to please themselves (*I'll pressure my kids to perform so that I am pleased or I'll pursue this kind of career to get a certain type of attention*). They are not living a Heb. 11:6/2 Cor. 5:9 life (living to please Christ).
5. Another term for co-dependency is “man-pleaser.” That is to say, he is more fearful of man than of God. Since the “beginning of wisdom” is the fear of God (Proverbs 1:7) and since each time a godly man encounters the Lord in His majesty, he falls down (Daniel in chapter 9, Isaiah in chapter 6, John in Rev. 1), we are pursuing foolishness when we instead fall down before man.
6. Edward Welch has written, *When Man is Big and God is Small*, and Brad Bigney has written *Gospel Treason*. The titles say it all – My view of man is that he is someone to fear. My view of God is so limited, that I think He is someone to consider later. Similarly, anything I put in front of God is really treasonous to God (James 4:4-5).
7. Codependency is only important insofar as it inhibits trust in/obedience to the Lord.

II. Biblical Episodes of Codependency and its Opposite

- A. *Lot with wicked men of Sodom* – (Gen 19) Offers his daughters to the immoral men to keep them from harming his visitors
- B. *Abraham/Hagar and Jacob/Bilhah/Zilpah* – (Gen. 16/30) These men went into these women who were not their wives in response to their wives' telling them to do so.
- C. *Joseph's whole family* – (Gen. 37, ff.) Favoritism/resentment/attempted murder
- D. *Samson telling Delilah because of her pressure* – (Judges 16) He wanted peace
- E. *Peter* (Matthew 16:13-23, John 18:17-27) In Matthew, Jesus foretold his death and Peter pressured the Lord to discount his message. In John, Peter denies he knew Jesus.
- F. *Pilate* (Mark 15:15) He releases Jesus to the crowd to please them.
- G. (OPPOSITE) *Abram with Isaac* – (Gen. 22) Abraham trusts God enough to offer his only son as a sacrifice, rather than trying to manipulate his way out of it
- H. (OPPOSITE) *Joseph* – (Gen. 50:20) Mistreatment by his brothers and Potiphar's wife.
- I. (OPPOSITE) *Abigail* – (1 Sam. 25) Tells her husband Nabal what she did to protect family
- J. (OPPOSITE) *Jesus* – (John 19:10) Response to Pilate when he said, “I have the power of life and death over you” and Jesus said, “You'd have no power unless my Father gave it.”
- K. (OPPOSITE) *Peter and John* (Acts 4:19-20) They told the rulers, elders, scribes and high priest that they had to obey God rather than men.

III. Response to Codependency

- A. Help him or her identify the **behavior pattern of control or avoidance currently.**
- B. Although you may see it easily, be sure **they see** the behavior/attitude as a sin problem. If they do not, they will not work to change it. They may *appear* to see it as a problem because they are trying to please you (codependency strikes again).
- C. Help him or her find **other places** this pattern shows up. Codependency as a pattern does not just show up in one relationship. Where else do they manipulate, avoid, control or otherwise adapt behavior from faith-filled, obedient behavior to something else in order to control their relationships or environment?
- D. Help them identify the **goal of these behaviors.** This is central ***because it is the goal of their codependency behavior that they need to repent of often even more*** than the behavior.

It is often tied to earlier life stories where a person can see how what they do now is a continuation of something they learned to protect themselves or to satisfy someone else in whom they put their trust/confidence/sense of well-being.
- E. Lead them in creative Bible study and homework that helps them understand the **majesty, supremacy, love and sovereignty of God.** Since what is often past pain may have understandably tempted them to control things, there has to be a “backward fall” into the arms of God as they take the risk of letting go of the device they have trusted.
- F. Lead them in studies and homework on the sufficiency of Christ to meet their needs, the completeness of his forgiveness, and the idea that they are now a new creature who lives not for themselves but for Him.
 1. Psalm 23 or 27
 2. Psalm 37:4-5
 3. Isaiah 26:3
 4. 2 Cor. 5:15-17
 5. Philippians 4:4-8
- G. Lead them in repentance from the thing they were trusting through confession and acknowledgement of the sufficiency of Christ and to trusting in the Lord.

Jeremiah 2:10-13 // James 4:7-8 // 1 John 1:9
- H. Help them carve out specific, planned behaviors in response to the situations they will certainly face where codependent responses would have been the former pattern, and where a truthful, gracious, God-trusting response is now called for.

Where I would not have spoken up, I will do so regardless of the response. (We are not referring to dangerous places where your life might be on the line; it that is the case, get into a safe place first.) However, I won't do it to get back at them. (Eph. 4:25-27)

Where formerly I would have waited until I knew how it would turn out, I will step out in faith, willing to trust the Lord regardless of how it turns out. (Again, not suggesting that you do something stupid because you “can.” Just referring to helping you trust God and take steps. Proverbs 3:5-6)

IV. Group Discussion

You are having lunch with Mary, who is a believer. She said she has been struggling with an overwhelming sense of guilt. She wonders if being a stay at home mother was a waste of her life because the relationships with her kids that she thought would be strong are not at all. She has two kids. Her oldest daughter (22) just got married and doesn't call home as often as she did in college. Mary wonders if there is something she has done to offend her daughter to create the distance that she is now experiencing. Mary's high school age son (17) isn't around as much as he used to be because of school and his new job. As you talk with Mary, she spends much of her thought life on "what I could have done differently to make things better today?" and "why are my kids not close to me?"

1. What additional data would you want to gather?
2. Mary needs hope, what hope can you give her?
3. What is Mary's specific Biblical sin, and how can you help her see it?
4. What Biblical truths does Mary need? Specific scriptures to turn to?
5. What homework would you give Mary?

Tim is in your community group (he is a believer). He asks you for some help in what he describes as a mid-life crisis (age 48). He feels that so many of his life-long pursuits are turning out to be disappointments. He moved to Winchester 10 years ago to startup a new branch of an insurance company because of his success at the same company in Leesburg. Throughout the last 15 years, the senior executive (and owner) had always praised his good work. In the last 12 months, ownership turned over and the new owner rarely speaks to him and has started up a new branch in Stephens City. The owner didn't seek any help from Tim with the new branch and you can tell that hurt Tim's feelings. At home, Tim says his marriage of 18 years has become stale. He said that his wife, Emily, used to be his cheerleader when they were first married. He describes memories of coming home and having Emily be genuinely interested in his work and wanting to help him succeed at work. Emily owns her own dog grooming business and she was the only employee until 12 years ago when she hired some help after having their first child. He said that the last 5 years Emily hardly has time for him. They started having kids when they were 35 and with 3 kids (ages 8, 11, 13) they are both playing taxi to take the kids to various weeknight activities. Tim summarizes his feelings about life as lackluster. He is contemplating a job change because he thinks that a new challenge would be good for him.

1. What questions would you ask Tim?
2. What are some of the potential thought patterns in Tim's heart?
3. Tim feels discouraged in life, how can you give him hope?
4. What is the specific sin you think Tim needs to see?
5. What are some Biblically based truths that Tim needs? Specific scriptures to turn to?
6. What homework would you give Tim?