

Dependent Need Kills Empathy (April 2, 2026)

“Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.’ (Mark 10:21) In Jesus’ encounter with the Rich Young Ruler, Jesus demonstrates some of the clearest differentiation, agency, responsibility, and independence that we will ever see in life. Jesus maintained this relational independence because He “loved him.”

Independence is required for empathetic and connected adult relationships. In contrast, dependence tends to force one or both parties into roles, behaviors, or expectations that they have not agreed to fulfill. This produces a co-dependent relationship where neither party is free to serve, love, or empathize with the other. The relationship is too enmeshed, boundaries are sacrificed, and the lack of one member is made the responsibility of the other member.

Empathy is the ability to hear, understand, feel, and connect with the experience of another person. But if one person cannot maintain independence from the other person and they have grown to be co-dependent, then there isn’t another person to empathize with. In a co-dependent relationship, one person is merely an extension of the other person. Two independent people can develop a healthy interdependent relationship. One dependent person in a relationship can force a move to co-dependence.

How do we prevent relationships from growing to be co-dependent?

We use and accept the word “no.”

Marshall Rosenberg wrote, “The more we interpret noncompliance as rejection, the more likely our requests will be heard as demands.” (Nonviolent Communication p. 80) The Rich Young Ruler said “no” to Jesus...and Jesus did not interpret his reply as rejection. This allows Jesus to continue to love him, even if the young man never changes his mind.