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Good News for Co-Dependent Christians

by Jason Li

If you visit your local bookstore to look for help with co-dependency, chances are you'll be greeted by an entire shelf of books on the subject. There certainly is no shortage of authors with things to say about co-dependency. It can even get a little confusing because there are so many different things being said about co-dependency. However, one thing that all of these writers would probably agree on is that those of us who are vulnerable to co-dependency struggle with our basic sense of selfhood. Put another way, we have a hard time connecting with who we really are inside. Getting in touch with our inner world and learning how to value our real thoughts, feelings and desires can feel very unsafe. All of us have a basic need for a safe place where we can allow the self to grow and develop. Unfortunately, most of us who struggle with co-dependency experience more shame than safety when it comes to connecting with the world of our inner self.

In this article I describe why Christians who struggle with co-dependency have a particularly difficult time developing a healthy self. I make the point that, when as Christians, we are able to see beyond our distorted views of God—and beyond our distorted understanding of how God views the self—we have the greatest resources for developing a healthy self. I discuss why I believe God, rather than being against the self, is really the Ultimate Ally for the self. Finally, I describe a two stage “curriculum” for Christians struggling with co-dependency—a “curriculum” which allows us first to develop a healthy self and then helps us to grow in genuine love and community.

Why It Is Difficult For Christians To Develop A Healthy Self

All co-dependents have a difficult time developing a healthy sense of self. But if you happen to be both co-dependent and Christian, then developing a healthy sense of self can be even more confusing and challenging. This is due to all the conflicting and strongly held views and attitudes about the self which exist among Christians. If you go to church and hear your pastor preach about “denying yourself” you may leave feeling like the self is bad. If you turn down an invitation to serve as a deacon because of your personal situation, you may get the feeling that you are being selfish and not being a “good Christian.” But you may then go to your Christian recovery meeting and hear how important it is to be “in touch” with your feelings and to remain “true to yourself.” Thoroughly confused, you visit a Christian bookstore to see what the Christian “experts” have to say about it. One author stresses the

importance of letting our “self” realize its God-given potential. Another author warns us about the dangers of following the cult of self-worship. It is no wonder that Christians who struggle with co-dependency—who are already confused about their selfhood—experience even more confusion based on the mixed messages they hear about the “self” from other Christians!

These feelings of confusion and uncertainty about selfhood can get in the way of our efforts to develop a healthier sense of self. The choices we face may not seem very appealing. Sometimes it may seem like we have to choose between having a good relationship with our self or being a good Christian. If we buy into the idea that the self is bad and anti-spiritual, we might try to “gut out” the Christian life. But as we “grit our teeth” and try to be a “Super Christian,” inside our self will feel alone and empty. If we focus more on self by choosing to pay more attention to our feelings or to set boundaries we feel comfortable with, we may have a nagging sense of doubt and guilt. We may ask ourselves: “Am I being selfish? Am I not being a ‘good Christian?’” If we press on in our effort to pay more attention to self without taking care of these nagging doubts, we may begin distancing from God. We may fear that God disapproves of our striving to fulfill our basic needs. God can become a Disapproving Eye glaring down at us from above. If we continue to think that God is somehow against our need for self-development and we distance ourselves from God, we may lose our spiritual anchor. We may go way beyond efforts to establish a healthy sense of selfhood to pursuing an unhealthy life of self-worship. In a state of confusion about selfhood, it is possible for us to vacillate back and forth between these two extremes. We may try the self-denial route until we get burned out or sick of it. Then we may flip over to the extreme self-indulgent side until our spiritual emptiness or guilt drives us back to the other side.

I have struggled with caretaking out of compulsion and with the inability to set healthy boundaries for myself. I found myself “falling off the horse on either side.” I have gone back and forth between serving out of compulsion and focusing only on myself. I would sometimes commit myself to serving others or my church but, without adequate boundaries, I found that service soon felt like slavery. Then I would go to the other extreme of not committing myself to anything because I was “gun-shy” about subjecting myself to what I feared would be more slavery. During these periods I would focus on indulging myself but found myself feeling empty and detached.

Abundant Living 101: Healthy Selfhood in Christ

How does God really view the self? Does Jesus’ command to “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” mean that God views the self as something evil that needs to be removed (Mark 8:34)? Isn’t Jesus saying that focusing on the self is a bad thing? And aren’t we living in a society that is already obsessed with self-worship?

God values the Self. While I agree that issues concerning self-denial and self-worship in our society are important ones, I think many Christians misunderstand God’s perspective on the self and have mistakenly “thrown out the baby (the self) with the bath water.” Many have inappropriately equated “being a self” with “selfishness.” Or they have inappropriately equated “denying self” with “getting rid of

self.” When Jesus says “deny yourself” he is not suggesting that we get rid of the self in terms of the basic essence of who we are as persons. He is not calling us to give up our ability to make our own choices. He is not calling us to become faceless robots. Instead, he is calling his followers to deny “selfishness” that is contrary to God’s will. This is a very different thing from denying the heart of who we are as persons. God is not an enemy of the self.

To go even further, God is actually the Ultimate Ally for the self. God wants us to be a somebody—a self. God wants us to be able to have good boundaries. God wants us to be able to make our own choices. Throughout the Bible we see how God consistently chooses not to violate the self boundary by imposing His will on a person’s will. It is clear that God has done all He can to help us choose wisely—by providing appropriate consequences for wrong and right choices, offering grace, forgiveness, redemption and eternal life through Jesus Christ, and giving us the Holy Spirit as our Counselor. Looking at how far God has extended Himself, one thing He has never done is to violate the self boundary and to make decisions for us. God may “knock at the door of our hearts,” but we are given the power to choose whether or not to open it (Revelation 3:23). Rather than being opposed to the self, God is the foremost advocate for the maintenance of boundaries that protect the basic territory of the self—even if it means we choose to make that territory a “junk yard” rather than a “temple of the Holy Spirit.”

God Encourages Healthy Boundaries. I vividly remember the first time I saw the Great Wall of China. Standing on the top of the wall, gazing in either direction, I was filled with awe at the sight of a huge stone wall that extended in either direction all the way to the horizon! It boggled my mind to think that this man-made structure could be seen from the moon! I learned that the wall was originally built by the Chinese Emperor to keep foreign intruders from invading and overrunning the homeland. Psychologically and spiritually, we need to be able to build a Great Wall around our lives that will keep out unwanted intruders—a safe, internal place where we can grow and develop as individuals. Healthy boundaries are crucial for creating a safe place—a home base for the self. Those of us who struggle with co-dependency need a safe home base before we can allow our self to slowly emerge and grow. This home base can be likened to a safe room where we can gather our real thoughts and feelings and take the time needed to decide what we really want to do—without fearing being shamed or attacked. The good news is that God wants us all to have this home base for the self where we can honestly face the realities of our lives. We can ask God for the strength to be able to build secure boundaries that enable us to have a home base for our self. God is not against the self but the Ultimate Supporter for the self.

Clarifying the Biblical Message. Realizing that the maintenance of appropriate self boundaries is important to God has some important implications for how we should relate to ourselves. I believe that a significant number of Christians, especially co-dependent Christians with weak boundaries, may feel overwhelmed by their brand of Christianity. For them, Christianity can feel like a never-ending pressure to follow an overwhelming number of biblical demands about how to live the Christian life. While many of the directives they try to respond to may, on the surface, appear biblical, when viewed in their entirety and in the context of a person with weak self boundaries, can have an oppressive effect on the self.

To illustrate how this may be, let's look at an example. Mary, a mother of two elementary age kids, rushes around from dawn to bedtime taking care of everyone's needs but her own. Home schooling, making meals, chauffeuring the kids to soccer practice, preparing to teach Sunday school, trying to be a godly wife and mother... the list goes on and on. Inwardly, however, she feels empty, burned out and is becoming more and more resentful of the never-ending demands. Yet she feels helpless to do anything about it because she is only doing what a "good Christian" should do. In this frazzled state, imagine how Mary would respond to a Bible passage like Philippians 2:3-5,7: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who...made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant." Though she already feels extremely tired, burned out, inwardly resentful of heavy burdens, and would like nothing better than to take it easy for a while, when Mary hears this message she may conclude that, in order to have a Christ-like attitude, she must consider others better than herself and put their needs ahead of her own... again.

In some situations it can be a healthy and good thing for us to put the needs of others ahead of our own. But recommending this as a general policy to people who struggle with co-dependency ignores a more important point. Many co-dependents, like Mary, feel like they have no choice. They must either do the "giving," "correct," "Christian" thing or be flooded with shame. The basic security of having a firm self boundary establishing a home base is lacking. The message co-dependents like Mary need to internalize is that God wants them to make a priority of establishing a safe home base where they can make their own choices and live humanely with themselves.

Letting God Love Us. Looking back at the Philippians passage, we can see that there is a definite sequence in God's plan for us. If we focus on the preceding verses of the passage, we can see that the call to Christ-like servanthood was given to those who have already had a grace-filled, restorative experience of Christ: "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love..."(Philippians 2:1-2, italics added). So it seems that, while God invites us to participate in the same loving spirit of servanthood as Christ, we cannot genuinely do so unless we first personally know the encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness and compassion of God towards our self.

The first step towards recovery for co-dependents is to allow God to nurture our self by being open to His healing grace and love for our imperfect selves. For co-dependents, realizing that the God we thought was somehow against self is actually our ultimate supporter for establishing firm self boundaries can be a life-changing awareness. We need to be less like Martha who frantically rushed around serving Jesus—and more like Mary who allowed herself to sit at Jesus' feet soaking in His grace and love (Luke 10:38-42). We need to realize that during this season in our development, the more spiritual path may not be compulsive self-sacrifice but allowing God to teach us how to say "No" to demands or requests without feeling bad about ourselves. As we learn to set these healthy boundaries we will be

establishing a foundation on which we can build normal, healthy relationships with self, others and God.

Abundant Living 201: Growing in Genuine Love and Community

As important as building up our self is, it should not be viewed as an end in itself. We are constantly bombarded by messages in our culture which suggest that the way to fulfillment is to live for ourselves. It is easy to “fall off the horse on either side” here. Some people focus solely on fulfilling the self. Others neglect the self. God, however, has a much richer plan in which learning to love ourselves is integrally tied to learning to love our neighbor. Having a solid sense of our self and of our individuality goes hand in hand with being able to enter into loving relationships and community (see I Corinthians 12 for a picture of a self that has a healthy sense of individuality and is intimately connected with the body of Christ). Having a solid sense of self with healthy boundaries is only an appetizer for the great banquet of love which God has prepared for us! But how do we make that transition from being able to build up our self and have healthy boundaries to developing healthy, caring relationships with others? How can people who are so used to caretaking out of compulsion learn to care and love in healthy ways?

Staying Connected to God’s Love. As I have already suggested, I think one key to learning how to care in a healthy manner is to allow time for God to build our selves up in His love. As we reach out to others in love we need to come back everyday to this reality. In Philippians 2:2-5 we can see that God’s plan for our self-development involves a building up of our selves in a grace-filled, restorative experience of Christ. As we take in love, grace and care, there is a natural overflow of this love, grace and caring outwards to others: “... make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Allowing one’s self to be built up in Christ’s love makes it possible for us to serve others out of love rather than out of compulsion or enslavement.

Staying Connected to Our Boundaries. A very practical step in learning to give of our self in a healthy way is being able to set boundaries that we are really able to live with. Having secure boundaries is essential, not only for living a sane life with ourselves but it is also essential to being able to genuinely care for others. How can we learn to care and give of ourselves in a healthy manner if we don’t have a basic place of safety for our self—if we don’t have secure boundaries? We may give our time, care for others, serve in the church. But, to the extent that we cannot say “no” or set boundaries, there will be a corroding force of compulsion and guilt that eats away at our ability to give our self in healthy ways. This giving of self can get mixed up with guilt, shame, compulsion, emptiness and exhaustion. Service without boundaries leads easily to resentment. People who struggle with co-dependency often do caretaking with an emotional gun of shame or guilt put up to their own head and that makes it difficult—if not impossible—to give freely and wholeheartedly.

Giving With Humility and Grace. Something I have found very liberating—that has helped me to break out of compulsive caretaking—is the truth that God really wants us to be able to set boundaries that we are willing and able to live with. In 2 Corinthians 9:7 it says: “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” From this passage, it is clear that God is not after our giving when it is done out of compulsion. He wants our giving to flow from our genuine desire and choice to give. Being able to choose the boundaries we feel comfortable with is a key step in being able to give genuinely rather than under compulsion.

How do we know where to draw our boundaries? How do we know how much giving is too little or too much? Perhaps it will help to look at an example of giving in the financial realm. What we say about giving in this area can be generalized to giving in other ways. Let's say that Joe gives 1% and Mary gives 20% of her income to the church. How much is too much? How much is too little? I don't think we can prescribe in a uniform way, that all Christians should be giving a certain percentage of their money, time or selves to the church. What is more important is taking into account what this giving means to the person. The question is not how much do they give but how do they give. Based on verses like 2 Corinthians 9:7, I believe God would rather have .01% given genuinely and wholeheartedly than 100% out of compulsion. So, what helps us to decide whether what we give is a healthy type of giving? It is not the absolute amount but the process—how we are giving it. Our giving needs to be out of genuine desire and freedom from compulsion. Each of us needs to determine what boundaries we are genuinely able to live with. How much of our self and in what way are we willing to offer our self to God or to others? To answer this we need to be open to our self and the Holy Spirit. Once we have a home base where we can be honest without fear of condemnation and can set appropriate boundaries, then we will be able to give genuinely and freely. This type of giving is the giving Jesus talks about when he says, “It is more blessed to give than receive.” (Acts 20:35). Giving of one's self as an overflow of the grace we have experienced may not always come easily or without difficulty or pain. We need not look further than Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane to dispel any Pollyanna-like notions of service. But the basic motivation of serving out of fear and compulsion versus serving out of an overflow of love and grace still makes all the difference in the world. It is the difference between the enslavement of caretaking out of compulsion and the freedom of genuine caring.

Have you ever tried to start a campfire on a windy day? Think of how vulnerable that first little spark is to every little gust of wind. In a similar way, our tiny sparks of genuine giving can be vulnerable to the “winds” of unrealistic expectations and shame. Perhaps you genuinely want to give at the 1% level. Then you think about different scripture passages on denying yourself and about your pastor's recent sermon on “Lordship” and... the spark is blown out. Let's look at an example: Sam genuinely would like to call up Bill to see how he is doing but he feels guilty because he thinks he should be doing more to help Bill. If the guilt is immobilizing, then Sam will avoid involving himself with Bill altogether. If the guilt is more powerful than his poorly defined boundaries, then he may overcommit himself to Bill beyond what he really is willing to do. In either case, another spark of genuine giving is snuffed out by guilt. I believe that God wants Christians like Sam to know that they can set their own boundaries when it comes to giving. Sam can call Bill up without feeling guilty

or ashamed that he is not doing more.

Extending the campfire image—we need to shelter that spark from the wind with our hands until the spark has grown into a flame that can withstand the windy gusts. In a similar way, God wants to put His hands around our tiny “sparks” of genuine giving and nurture them gradually into a bonfire of love. One way His hands shelter our sparks of genuine giving is through helping us establish secure boundaries. With God’s hands sheltering our sparks from the winds of guilt, shame and perfectionistic expectations, they can grow—step by little step—into a flame of genuine caring and love.

In Summary

God is the Ultimate Ally for the self. God wants us to be able to choose boundaries that we are comfortable with. God wants us to have a home base for the self that is a safe place to connect with our real feelings, thoughts and desires. But having a healthy sense of self and healthy boundaries is only the beginning of God’s good plan for His children. It is only “Abundant Living 101” in the school of life. The second course—which lasts for a lifetime—is “Abundant Living 201: Growing in Genuine Love and Community.” It is important for each of us to know where we are in our own recovery process. Do I have a home base—a place where it is safe for me to be myself? Am I able to choose boundaries that I can live with—without feeling guilty? If not, maybe the most spiritual thing I can do is to allow God to build up my self and help me to develop secure boundaries. It is important to recognize that there are seasons in our recovery process during which allowing our self to be built up in Christ is not selfishness but a spiritual priority. For those who struggle with co-dependency, this may mean building up our “no” muscle. Allowing God to teach us to say “no” may be more important to our spiritual growth than saying “yes” to another “spiritual” activity. We don’t always need to have a clearly articulated or spiritual-sounding reason for saying “no.” Sure, sometimes we may err on the side of being overly self-indulgent, but it is more likely that we will err on the side of compulsion. With God’s grace, we can learn by trial and error. In the process, we can more deeply realize that God wants our genuine love so much that He is not going to coerce us into serving Him out of compulsion. God wants us to be able to choose whatever boundaries we are comfortable with. We don’t need to rush ourselves into giving more than we want to give. If we find ourselves genuinely not wanting to give, we don’t force ourselves to give. If we have been “drawing from the well of forced giving” for so long that our well is dry then we may need to allow ourselves to just sit at Jesus’ feet and soak up God’s grace until we are filled again. As we are able to choose boundaries that we are comfortable living with, as we are able to experience a safe place for our self to develop, as we are able to take in the tenderness, compassion and love that Christ has for us, as our self is built up in Christ—we will in proper time begin to respond with genuine caring and love from the heart. To whatever extent we genuinely want to give, we do so. Step by tiny step, we give what we are truly willing to give. No more and no less. By doing so, we will be building up our “giving muscle” and growing stronger in our capacity to genuinely love. As we find ourselves exercising this giving muscle by genuinely choosing to lift “heavier weights,” we will have progressed into the second course: “Growing in Genuine Love and Community.” In this course we will discover the riches of what God is calling us to: genuine loving and real community.

As we learn to take in the grace and love of God we will gradually become more and more able to share that love and grace in healthy ways. May God grant us the courage and wisdom to grow in grace this day.

Jason Li is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Bethel College in Arden Hills, Minnesota.

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