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Christ Wasn't Codependent: How to Love Thy Neighbor *and Thyself*

By Hannah Larsen

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren, if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never faileth” (Moroni 7:46, Book of Mormon).

Charity is a cardinal virtue in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The prophet Mormon teaches a powerful sermon on this topic in the Book of Mormon. The motto of the Relief Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints echoes the same sentiment: Charity. Seek after charity. Charity never faileth. Charity is, in essence, the pure love of Christ (Moroni 7:47, The Book of Mormon). It means responding to the needs of others with sincere concern and noble intention, sometimes at one's own expense.

Certainly, “Sacrifice brings forth the blessings of Heaven,”⁸ but is there a point at which selflessness can actually be detrimental? Is charitable giving enhanced by our own exhaustion and self-denial?

Please do not misunderstand, service and generosity are essential to a virtuous, and even Godly, life. But, there can be a tendency to view this call to charity as an appeal to martyrdom; some misconstrue this Christlike concept of service and perceive self-sacrifice as a license for entirely neglecting oneself. What exactly did the Savior mean when He said to “love thy neighbor as thyself” (Mark 12:31, Kings James Bible)?

This self-abnegating mindset, as holy and altruistic as it may seem (and often is), can in extreme cases actually be detrimental to an individual's self-concept. Obsessing over the needs of others alone—especially if through your service, you fail to meet your own needs—can lead to a relationship style known as codependency.

Codependency can manifest as constant people-pleasing,¹ desires to control² another's mood or behavior, unhealthy boundaries,³ or obtaining value based on the appraisals of others.⁴ This relationship style is typically seen in romantic relationships, but can be seen in any relationship where an individual fails

to be self-sufficient. Codependency is tricky because it masquerades as selflessness and Christlike goodness, but in reality, it is neither and can actually do more harm than good. Codependency poses a sneaky lie that says, “If I just serve enough and give enough and sacrifice enough, I’ll surely be closer to the Savior and feel happier.” Unfortunately, this is not often the outcome.

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As a recovering codependent myself, I hope to impart the wisdom I’ve gathered from my own experiences and from our great exemplar, Jesus Christ, and His ever generous but never codependent nature.

Prioritize Self-Care

If you’ve fallen victim to the codependent lie, it may be difficult to prioritize your own needs. After all, codependency thrives on the idea that everyone else needs to be situated and satisfied before even considering thinking about yourself.⁵ You attain a warped sense of personal fulfillment from running entirely on fumes but still find the strength to give someone the dregs of your energy. This kind of service can be unhealthy. Your needs matter, and it is important that you take time to reenergize.

Christ demonstrated this principle in the New Testament. Luke chapter 5 recounts the story of a leper who approaches the Savior and is healed through the leper’s faith and the

Savior’s power. The fame of this miracle spreads quickly, and soon, multitudes gather to the Savior to be healed of their own sicknesses. After attending to the sick and afflicted, “[Jesus] withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed” (Luke 5:16, King James Bible).

Christ was the Master Healer and was constantly using His gift to bless others. At the same time, Jesus expertly navigated the balance between “people” and “alone time.” While still serving and loving those He was with, He took time to be still and commune with

God when he withdrew himself into the wilderness. In order to overcome codependent tendencies, following the Savior’s example and prioritizing self-care is essential. Seeking to always have a giving attitude is admirable, but you cannot fill someone else’s cup when yours is empty.³

Set Healthy Boundaries

Codependents often go above and beyond what’s necessary in the hope of receiving validation from the recipient of their actions. If this sounds familiar to you, you may have been caught up in giving more than what was asked for, perhaps even before it was asked for. Awareness of others’ needs is commendable, but it can also be unhealthy if giving becomes a compulsion. For that reason, it is important to have healthy boundaries.³

Christ was the perfect prototype of selfless giving. After teaching a multitude in Mark 6, Christ didn’t want to send them away hungry; instead, He miraculously multiplied

the meager portion of the loaves and fishes (see Mark 6:33–46, King James Bible) to feed all who were present. Notwithstanding, Christ also had healthy boundaries, and wanted His followers to see Him not just as a bread distributor, but as the Bread of Life.

As such, after His charitable offering, “He constrained his disciples to get into the ship, and to go to the other side before unto Bethsaida, while he sent away the people” (Mark 6:45, King James Bible). Christ is our exemplar of generosity, but even He recognized the importance of serving people when they are ready. He did not allow others to take advantage of His goodness. He did have boundaries for Himself, and He held firm to those boundaries in a generous and loving manner. Having healthy boundaries allows you to be prepared to effectively serve those around you, as well as helps keep codependent tendencies in check.³

Value Yourself

Finally, learn to value yourself. Codependents frequently put others’ needs before their own, which is usually noble but can become unhealthy when distorted. If you’ve been acting codependently, you may also find yourself seeking external praise in order to feel accepted and loved. However, understand that you are valuable, and you have important needs.⁵

Again, Christ is our great exemplar of self-worth. Christ was never boastful or proud, but he was sure of His role and mission. He knew who He was, and He didn’t seek out the praise of others. As children of God, we, too, can feel valued for our inherent worth. How can we fully love our neighbor (Mark 12:31, King James Bible) if we do not first love ourselves? Accomplishing this feat to recognize your inherent worth and value takes practice,⁶ but with consistent effort, we can love ourselves just as much as we love others.

Principles in Practice

Codependent tendencies can be difficult to overcome, especially if they're hiding behind the well-intentioned pursuit of charity and selflessness. Unhealthy relationship behaviors can be conquered, however,

and the Savior is the perfect example of how to do so. Christ gave freely, but He also knew the importance of meeting His own needs, serving others when they were prepared, and was maintaining a surety of His own divinity. Surely, in all ways we should follow His perfect example. Charity

for others is essential to a fulfilling life, but just as equally important is having charity for yourself, which is a vital component to overcoming codependent tendencies. Only when the pure love of Christ is also extended to you will charity never fail.

Endnotes

- 1 Lancer, D. (2018, October 8). *Symptoms of codependency*. [Psychcentral](#).
- 2 Raypole, C. (2019, November 5). *8 tips for overcoming codependence*. [Healthline](#).
- 3 Gaspard, T. (2013, December 31). *Overcoming codependency: Reclaiming yourself in a relationship*. [Huffpost](#).
- 4 Borresen, K. (2018, February 2). *Am I codependent? 10 signs you might be, according to experts*. [Huffpost](#).
- 5 Ward, D. (2014, January 17). *3 ways to learn to love yourself*. [Psychology Today](#).
- 6 Stewart, A. R. (2018, September 18). *13 steps to achieving self-love*. [Healthline](#).
- 8 Phelps, W. W. (1792–1872). Praise to the man. *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Hymnbook*
- 9 *King James Bible*. (2017). King James Bible Online. <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org> (Original work published 1769).