

Enabling

Are you offering the wrong kind of help to your loved ones?

By Dave Batty

One of the most common problems I see in Christians today is confusion about how to help a loved one who has a problem. Offering the wrong kind of help, they end up feeding the problem—and working against what God is trying to do in the life of their loved one.

Every day we get calls and letters from people asking—how can we help our son or daughter or grandchild who is using drugs, running with the wrong friends, rebelling against their parents?

Many are godly parents who have prayed and fasted for their child—yet they watch painfully as their child continues down a path of rebellion and destruction. One mother told me, “I pray for my children, but why is God so slow to answer?”

So what can parents or grandparents do to help their loved ones?

Stop enabling!

Enabling

- Offering the wrong kind of help.
- Anything that stands in the way of persons experiencing the natural consequences of their own behavior.
- Rescuing your loved one so they don't experience the painful consequences of their irresponsible decisions.

What is enabling?

Enabling is offering the wrong kind of help. Enabling is rescuing your loved ones so they don't experience the painful consequences of their irresponsible decisions.

Enabling is anything that stands in the way of persons experiencing the natural consequences of their own behavior.

Galatians 6:7-8 speaks to Christians about this issue with simple—even blunt truth. “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.” (NIV)

God's word here is specific—Christians, don't be deceived! Your own children can deceive you when it comes to this scripture. We are willing to accept this verse when it comes to sinners living around us, but when it comes to our own children, are we willing to let God be in control?

Many parents simply cannot stand by and watch their child suffer pain from bad decisions,

so they rescue them. One grandmother told me, “I can understand that my alcoholic daughter needs to experience the painful consequences of her actions—but I cannot stand to see my little grandchildren suffer—they are innocent little ones.” So she “helps” them.

Isn't God's love unconditional?

Why should I put conditions on how I show love to others?

At first glance it seems the loving thing to do—to help the innocent grandchildren. But do we “mock God” when we do that? Are we not getting in God's way? There are no simple answers.

If God specifically speaks to you to reach out and offer specific help—then by all means do it! But all too often we offer help, not because God specifically spoke to us but because we think it is the right thing to do.

Some parents want to minimize the damage in the lives of their children. The result—they become part of the deception. A father said, “I make

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sure my teenage daughter has a condom when she goes out on a date. I don't want her to get AIDS." He is deceiving himself and his daughter—and the man she is dating. Safe sex? Safe sin?

When we give anyone the impression there is a "safe way to sin," we are mocking God. Sin always causes destruction. When we step in and rescue people from the consequences of their sin, we only push our loved one farther down the path of delusion and destruction.

There are plenty of other enablers ready to help your loved one when you stick to your commitment to stop enabling.

Are you offering the wrong kind of help?

So how do we know if we are offering the wrong kind of help? One test is to ask—does my help prevent this person from experiencing the natural consequences of their irresponsible decisions?

Another test—the help you have been giving—is it actually helping? Is your loved one changing? Look at their actions—is there clear evidence of becoming a responsible godly person? Or is your loved one continuing down the path to destruction? You've got to face facts—stop living in the land of wishful thinking.

Parents often start enabling their children when they are very

young. When our son was 13 years old and the new school year had started, he forgot to take his lunch. So I dropped it off at school on my way to work. A few days later it happened again—then again.

My wife and I decided to stop rescuing Tim in this area of his life. We told him, "From now on, you have full responsibility for your lunch. You must pack it yourself. You must remember to take it to school.

"If you forget, you go without lunch. We will not bring it to school. We forbid you to borrow money at school to pay for it." (The school had a loan policy for students who forgot their lunch money.)

In just a few days, Tim forgot his lunch. A few days later it happened again. So do you think he changed and became really responsible with his lunch? No—there was no quick lesson that led to maturity.

Some days he packed his lunch and left it setting on the counter. Other days he forgot his quarter for buying milk.

His best friend at school often shared his lunch with Tim when Tim forgot his. Yes—there are plenty of other enablers ready to help your loved one when you stick to your commitment to stop enabling.

One day Tim packed his lunch and walked out the door leaving it on the kitchen counter. That night I asked Tim how lunch was because I knew he had left his lunch at home that day.

He had remembered to bring

his quarter for milk, he told me. As he slowly drank it in the cafeteria, another student asked—"who wants my apple—I don't want it." Tim grabbed it quickly.

Then his choir teacher came through handing out cupcakes to all the choir—including Tim—as a special way of expressing appreciation for a recent concert they had done.

Finally the cafeteria staff called, "Free seconds for the leftovers!" and Tim got a free hamburger. It's amazing how the Lord provides!—the Lord?

Well, so much for the lessons on experiencing hunger pains all afternoon in hopes of teaching our son to be responsible!

Through the rest of the school year Patty and I stuck to our commitment—Tim didn't starve to death even though he forgot his lunch numerous times.

What I want you to know is that we felt pain every time we saw him forget his lunch. Just a few simple words from us, and he could have avoided hunger. But we would have been reinforcing his irresponsible behavior.

Just to let you know—today our son is a youth pastor at an inner city church in Detroit. And yes—he has learned much about being a responsible person.

All too often parents keep rescuing their children when the problems are little problems. Before you know it your children are teenagers or young adults, still making irresponsible decisions, and parents are still

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Characteristics of the Enabler

- 1. Works for self improvement.** If I were a better parent my son wouldn't use drugs. If I were a better wife, my husband wouldn't run around with other women.
- 2. Changes the environment to accommodate the person with the problem.** Let's change schools and get our child away from those trouble-makers.
- 3. Takes on the whole world in defense of their loved one.** The whole legal system is corrupt, and my child is getting unjust treatment.
- 4. Their pain increases.** Because the problems are not being resolved in the life of their loved one.
- 5. Communication deteriorates.** The issues are not being resolved, defenses are high and delusion is still present in both the enabler and the loved one with the problems.
- 6. Enabling is habit-forming.** The enabler offers the same help as in the past without assessing its effectiveness or appropriateness for today. The enabler may get such a sense of personal satisfaction from help that s/he does not stop to assess whether the help is helping or hurting.

rescuing them—but now we are talking about big problems.

A grandmother wrote me this past week about her grandson who is using drugs. "Is there information somewhere on what parents must do to deal with their children on drugs?" she asked.

I called and she told me a sad story of her son, a professor at a Christian college, married to a wonderful Christian woman—they have three children. Two are doing great, but one son is using drugs. He failed his first year of college and is now living back at home with his parents.

They give their son money to buy drugs, and they are making the payments on his car. Mom is reluctant to see him get a job because then he would have more money to buy drugs and get in more trouble.

They are praying for a miracle—but they are feeding an addiction—all in the name of love.

If their son is going to change his way of living then the parents must stop offering the wrong kind of help. I could give story after story of those who have come to Teen Challenge—many decided to get help only after their family stopped enabling them.

If you stop enabling, get ready for more trouble

When you stop enabling—when you stop offering the wrong kind of help—you have no guarantee of quick solutions

in the life of your loved one.

Your loved one may become very angry at you—and for a "good" reason. You've stopped rescuing them. Now they are beginning to feel the painful consequences of their irresponsible decisions.

He or she may attack you, "What kind of Christian are you? Doesn't the Bible say you are supposed to help people in need?" They will use any argument to heap guilt and condemnation on you—but don't receive that into your heart.

You must stand on the facts—especially if you have a tender heart, easily moved by emotional, passionate messages. You must continue to rehearse the facts.

How do you handle the pain of having a loved one on the path to destruction?

Jesus said, "Do not let your heart be troubled. You have put your trust in God, put your trust in Me also." (John 14:1 New Life Bible)

You need to take hold of His peace. It will carry you through the difficult times of living with a loved one who has a life-controlling problem.

Are you afraid to trust God?

When you stop enabling your loved one it may involve letting your loved one go down the path of destruction. You may be

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saying, “I can’t bear to see my daughter in such pain and danger. She might get killed! And then I would have her death on my hands. I can’t let that happen!”

Are you saying you are afraid to trust God? Is your God big enough to keep track of your child headed down the path of rebellion? Is your God too busy to give personal attention to the needs of your loved one?

Is your God big enough to keep track of your loved one who is headed down the path of rebellion?

The prodigal son’s father was not an enabler

Place your hope in the story of the prodigal son recorded in Luke chapter 15. We see a powerful picture of a father who did not enable his son. He allowed him to leave home, knowing the son would soon waste the inheritance he had worked a lifetime to save.

Even though the Bible does not give us all the details, I am sure this father lived in pain, not knowing what was going on in his son’s life.

If you have read this story recently you know that the son left home, spent everything he had, ended up in a pig pen and died. Right? No—but isn’t that what many people fear will happen to their child? If I let him go down that path and don’t stop

him, he’s going to die!

So what brought the rebellious son to a place of being ready to change? He ended up in the pig pen and went to his psychiatrist and worked through all his childhood traumas and found the answers—No! I’m not against godly counseling, but counseling is not always the answer.

Luke says he ended up in the pig pen. He was so hungry that he was tempted to eat what the pigs left when they had finished eating.

I was raised on a small farm in Wisconsin. We raised a few pigs and many days I fed them. But never was I tempted to eat what they left! This young man must have been really desperate!

God’s help for rebellious children

Now comes the good news from the pig pen—Luke says, “and no one helped him.” (verse 16)

God did not condemn anyone for failing to help this desperate young man in the pig pen. No thundering judgment from heaven toward those who did nothing.

Where is the father? Why isn’t he out looking for his son? Doesn’t he care that his son is starving to death?

The father is at home—waiting in painful peace. Peace because he has committed his son into God’s hands. Painful peace because he hurts for his son who is hurting. But he waits for God’s solution. He’s not

going to get in God’s way.

So what is happening to the son? Since “no one helped him,” he’s experiencing the full pain of his irresponsible decisions.

The very next words point to the truth of God’s way of helping stubborn children caught up in a destructive lifestyle—“He came to his senses.”

“How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare and here I am starving to death! I

Pain Motivates Change

When we rescue a loved one from the painful consequences of irresponsible decisions, we often slow down their motivation to change.

will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.” (vs. 17-19 NIV)

Who can take credit for helping the son in his greatest time of need? No one! At the point of starving to death—he came to his senses. At the lowest point in his life—God still knew exactly where he was.

The son made a choice—the right choice—that put him on the path to restoration—the path to life!

When he meets his father, true repentance comes with his words, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.” (vs. 21) He takes personal responsibility for his past

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actions. It's time for joyful peace and a celebration!

Desperate, but not repentant

But some children want to come home—in desperation—but not like the prodigal son. A pastor's wife came to my office one day, deeply troubled. Two years earlier her son had been a senior in high school, rebellious, failing his classes, using drugs. The parents gave their son 3 rules:

1. No using drugs in the house.
2. On school nights he must be home by midnight.
3. If he did not attend school, he must get a job.

Disgusted with such outrageous rules, the son left home and stayed with different friends until he wore out his welcome. Now two years later he was calling his mom saying, "I want to come home."

She was deeply troubled that if she said, "No," she would be failing to show God's agape love—unconditional love to her son. I asked her, "Has your soon agreed to your rules?"

"No," she said, "he's given us his own set of rules."

I assured her that she was doing the right thing to say "No" to her unrepentant son. He was still looking for someone to rescue him from the painful consequences of his irresponsible decisions.

When you stop enabling your

loved one, you have no guarantee of a quick transformation in the life of your loved one. When you look at the story of the prodigal's son father, when he offered the right kind of help, his son went from bad to worse before things got better.

God is not an enabler

God will not offer the wrong kind of help to you or your loved ones. He will not rescue you from the consequences of your irresponsible decisions.

He will not help you in such a way that would feed the problems in your life.

Even though He sees clearly all your problems, He still loves you deeply.

Learning to be at peace with God

You can rest in the peace that God has the address of your loved one, no matter how deep they are in sin. His love far surpasses your love. He knows what will work best to bring your loved one to that point of change.

You've got to trust God—even when things are going from bad to worse. Stop offering the wrong kind of help. Stop feeding the problem. Stop being deceived. Stop mocking God. Trust Him.

Place your hope in Him

In Galatians Chapter 6, Paul

goes on to give words of encouragement after challenging us not to be deceived into ignoring God's law of sowing and reaping. "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." (Galatians 6:9-10 NIV)

Two times Paul refers to "doing good" to people. I think it would be very appropriate to say that he is referring to offering the right kind of help—not enabling. Let us not become weary of offering the right kind of help, which in some cases is offering "tough love."

Let us not enable others, especially those who belong to the family of believers. The promise is clear to us—if we continue to offer the right kind of help, we will reap a harvest—a good harvest. If we offer the wrong kind of help we will reap a harvest of pain, problems, regret and more disappointments.

Jesus is ready to help us offer the right kind of help. He offers to give us wisdom to make the difficult decisions. He also stands ready and waiting with open arms to help our loved ones who really need His help.

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Discussion Guide

The following questions can be used for your personal reflection on this topic, or it can be used as a guide for a group discussion. If this is used in a group setting, please understand that you are not required to disclose specific details of past sins, failures or personal experiences.

1. What are some examples of enabling (offering the wrong kind of help) you have seen in your own family or friends?
2. In your own life—in the past or present—were there people who enabled you—who rescued you from the consequences of your irresponsible decisions? What impact did that “help” have on your life?
3. Is there a family member or friend that you are presently enabling? If yes, how is your help rescuing them? What do you fear will be the consequences if you do not give this person help?
4. Read Galatians 6:7-10. Some people feel guilt for not helping others in need. How easy is it for others to use guilt to get you to help them?
5. Read Proverbs 3:5-6. Some battle with the fear: “If I don’t help my loved ones then something worse will happen to them—they might even die!”
 - a. How big an issue is this fear in your life?
 - b. How difficult is it for you to trust God as you stop enabling your loved ones?
6. Some have a difficult time determining if their help is enabling—the wrong kind of help—or if it is the right kind of help.
 - a. How hard is it for you to determine if you are offering the wrong kind of help?
 - b. What scriptures can you stand on to help you in making Godly decisions about what kind of help to give your loved ones?

Scriptures for further study: Proverbs 1, Luke 15



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