

Can Charity Be Codependent?

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I am a recovering codependent and a Christian. When I talk to my codependent friends I hear all about taking care of myself, standing up for myself, and putting myself first. In Robin Norwood's book *Women Who Love Too Much* step No. 9 is "Learn when to be selfish." When I go to church I hear about turning the other cheek, giving more than you are asked to give, going that extra mile, dying to self and for better or for worse. Emmet Fox in the *Sermon on the Mount* says to "resist not evil."

I think you can see my dilemma. I am confused. Should I be learning how to be selfish or should I be learning how to sacrifice? Where does Christian charity leave off and codependency begin? This is the question I would like to explore in this essay. I believe it is an important question for codependent Christians and I believe there is an answer. That answer lies in the proverbial "middle ground."

To find the middle ground, I had to do a lot of soul searching. This took years, but eventually I came to understand that some kinds of charity are genuine and others are spurious—of illegitimate birth. The latter arises out of our own personal needs. The former is a gift from God passed on to others through us. You might say it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Origins

Spurious charity often arises out of fear, guilt or obligation. Charity born of the Holy Spirit comes from a full heart—my cup runneth over.

Balance

Spurious charity is exclusive to others—there is none left over for ourselves. (The second great commandment makes it clear that you shall love your neighbor *as* yourself. (*Matthew 22:39*), and, of course, charity begins at home.)

Anonymity

Spurious charity wants recognition. Charity born of the Holy Spirit manifests itself in an atmosphere of shyness and begs for secrecy.

Reciprocity

Spurious charity always has strings attached. (Will you like me if I am kind to you? Will you thank me? Will you return the favor when I need help?) Charity born of the Holy Spirit desires no *personal* payback.

Impact

Recipients of spurious charity often feel guilty and bite the hand that feeds them. They sense the dishonesty of the giver or at least the hidden agenda. They feel controlled. On the other hand, those who receive charity born of the Holy Spirit sense the purity and love from whence it flows. Thus, they are not resentful and they do not feel obligated. They, along with the giver, have a feeling of completion and wholeness. Intimacy is achieved between two human beings which has a wonderful sense of authenticity.

Passing it On

Recipients of spurious charity want to hoard the gift. How can I get more, they ask? Charity born of the Holy Spirit creates a desire in the receiver to pass it on. “Freely, freely you have received. Freely, Freely give. Go in my name and because you believe. Others will know that I live.” (Christian hymn)

The Fishes and the Loaves

Charity which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit creates abundance. Only part of the gift goes to the immediate receiver. The rest goes out into the universe. It floats around and fills the world with love. In this form, it protects the world from evil.

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Of course, there is always a fine line between spurious love and love born of the Holy Spirit. This is because we are human. We are not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit only flows through us. But as one surrenders to the Holy Spirit more fully, the fruit of the spirit will be uncontaminated and it will truly feed the hungry people of the world. Like the water that does make us thirst again, the hunger satisfied by true Christian charity is everlasting. And, of course, spurious love is better than no love at all. Sometimes we have to feed the body any food available, before we can save the soul.