

Idolatry and the Curse of Finding My SOURCE in Someone Else

#1 Principle: *We battle the curse of seeking to control and dominate others in all our relationships.*

#2 Principle: *I will not move toward healthy relationships until I identify curse-filled relationships.*

#3 Principle: *When I look to other people for my SOURCE of life, I am committing the sin of idolatry.*

Illustration: Jan comes from a background where there is pressure for outward conformity with no loving empowerment for true, lasting inner growth and change. She conforms because she needs to be valued.

If a family has a history of curse-full, performance-oriented relationships, we can be certain of several unhappy results. In Jan's case she carries a deeply ingrained sense of shame, or defectiveness. Jan also learned to perform in many ways to cover her shame. Unfortunately, her efforts have failed to erase the feeling of defectiveness—in fact, by working harder she has set herself up for failure. Jan took on more church duties and obligated herself to numerous school activities. She also determined to live up to the fruit of the Spirit list—to be loving, patient, kind . . . After each slip, failure, sin, omission, or faux pas, her sense of defectiveness was highlighted. It was crushing. Jan felt like a big fat zero in terms of worth.

In an idolatrous relationship, the well-being of one person is dependent upon the full performance of the other person. Very often, needy, empty-feeling people are drawn toward someone who is just like them. Both, in fact, sense emptiness on the inside, while their performance signals they are full. **That is because the emptiness of each person so desperately needs the full performance of the other.**

FACT: Empty people cannot fill other empty people.

Christians balk at the term codependency. In a way, this is a right reaction. Too often, the word codependency has been used to speak only of the psychological aspects of human relationships. Christians must know there is a deeper level at which we must learn to live, a level where spiritual principles operate, and where our relationship to God must be considered.

As Christians, we are members of a spiritual family, with God as our Father; He cannot be left out of our figuring—or our counseling. The addictiveness of the relationship, on a psychological level, can be seen by looking at each person's preoccupation with the other's performance. Much like an alcoholic who is preoccupied with alcohol, or the workaholic who is preoccupied with his work, **couples can put their hopes and focus on another person's behavior.**

In a performance oriented, shame-based relationship, when a spouse is up and happy, then the partner feels like he or she is doing a good job. If a spouse is down, then the partner works hard to make his or her spouse happy and relaxed again. This is co-dependency.

1. Codependency occurs in any situation where a performance standard is more important than real psychological and spiritual needs. In a relationship like this, people become codependent, depending on each other's performance for their sense of well-being and validity.
2. Codependency is simply another term for what **the Bible calls idolatry**. Our source of happiness and our sense of relaxation and fulfillment should come from our connection with God through our faith relationship in Jesus Christ.

The way to “fix” a spouse in a performance-oriented, shame-based idolatrous relationships is two-fold:

1. Don't notice when someone else fails; if you do notice, you are the problem.
2. Notice and do something in an attempt to correct the other person's negative behavior or attitude. Either way, it takes time, energy, and emotion to fix the other person.

AN ILLUSTRATION FROM COUNSELOR JEFF VANVONDEREN:

Jan and Tony enter the office and I ask, “Why have you come? How can I help?” Jan was readily able to tell me a list of the things that are not working in the marriage, those things for which they needed help. Tony told me that the reason he was there was because Jan made him come.

“What would have to change in order for you to be happy?” I asked Jan. “What would it take for you to feel secure?” She thought. Then came a long list of behaviors Tony would have to change. “If he would stop blowing up at me when I mention something that's bothering me . . . Like the way he keeps missing our weekly Bible study group. He never used to. It worries me that he's not living up to the commitment we made to these people. Or when he buys something for himself that costs a lot of money. It's not that he doesn't work hard and deserve it. But . . . well, we were taught as young Christians to make these decisions together. It makes me feel left out—and like . . . well, maybe Tony is bailing out of our commitment to each other . . .” And the list went on.

Tony had missed a high mark they had aimed for. As always, Jan took it to mean that his “failure” meant he didn't love her as he used to—and therefore, something was defective about her. The bottom line was that Tony's outer performance was interpreted to mean Jan was as worthless as she felt. Of course, she did not see that her sense of worthlessness was there all along.

Turning to Tony, I asked the same question: “What would have to change for you to be happy?” His response was typical of husbands: “If my wife would get off my case, everything would be fine. I don't know what the big deal is! If she would just be okay, everything would be okay. Things just aren't that bad.” And so, the relationship that God has provided as a grace-full resource, which could affirm both of these people, is full of strings attached: **“You are defective. Perform!”**

Some have shame so deeply ingrained into their identity, and they have become experts in performing and in getting others to perform in order to cover the shame. Unhealthy patterns for trying to earn love and acceptance are such a part of their very fiber that these things are hard even to recognize, let alone change. *If trying hard was the key to a healthy marriage, most couples would find themselves in the Healthy Marriage Hall of Fame instead of in counseling* **Trying hard is not the answer.**

Turning to God as your source of happiness, contentment, and fulfillment is the only way that a person can break the cycle of co-dependency in a relationship.

SOURCE: VanVonderen, Jeff. *Families Where Grace Is in Place*, Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Discussion Questions 1. Why do you think you or someone you know takes on more and more responsibilities outside the home—particularly at church? 2. Have you ever been told or felt that your own needs were not a consideration? Explain. Do you think they should be? 3. What does a codependent relationship look like? 4. What danger do you see in making lists of things your spouse is not doing, or doing incorrectly? 5. Why is trying harder not the answer in a troubled relationship?