

Introduction

My father was an alcoholic and my mother was codependent. I am both. After years of suffering from my love addiction, I finally got into recovery. Then I went to church and got confused about love all over again. This article came out of my attempt to sort all of this out.

Unconditional Love Revisited

When I went into counseling to fix my abusive marriage, I was told by my therapist that I was codependent. “What does that mean?” I asked. “It means you love too much,” he replied. “How can you love too much?” I cried. “Didn’t Christ ask us to love each other unconditionally? Isn’t that one of the most important Christian principles? Aren’t we supposed to walk that extra mile and turn the other cheek? (*Mt 5:39-41*). Doesn’t love bear all things and endure all things? (*1 Cor 13: 7*). “Not always,” he replied. I was dumbfounded. After all, he was a Christian counselor.

My therapist went on to suggest that I get a divorce. I refused. I wanted to honor my marriage vows, and so I stayed married to my husband. “I will just keep loving him unconditionally,” I thought to myself, “and that will heal him and our marriage.” Unfortunately, the more I loved my husband unconditionally, the more abusive he got. He gave new meaning to the expression, “biting the hand that feeds you.”

Eventually, I realized I was putting my children in danger by staying married to this man and so I divorced him. Then I spent years going to a support group for codependent women trying to figure out whether unconditional love was good or bad. What were my conclusions? Well, today, I believe that unconditional love is good and important, but that it is not always the best course of action. Sometimes, to love someone, you must place conditions are your good will. Marriage would be an example. Love in a marriage should be reciprocal—flowing in both directions. And while Christ may ask us to love our enemy, we do not have to marry him.

Furthermore, while I might have to place conditions on my good will, I do not have to give up the “love” part of unconditional love. By this I mean that I do not have to give up the tenderness I felt for my husband—the feelings that led me to “bear all things” for so long. But the feeling of love cannot always be accompanied by turning the other cheek. That cheek can get pretty swollen. Sometimes we have to take a step backward and love from a distance. We have to say to our partners, “I will *love* you without conditions, but I will not live with you. If you respect me and treat me in accordance with Christ’s doctrine on marriage, I will stick with you through the bad times. If you abuse me, I will have to abandon the marriage.”

Saying that unconditional love is important but not always practical is not easy. I don’t want to abandon the ideal of “bearing all things” in the name of love. However, I will say that I am happier and more fulfilled now that I realize I deserve to receive love as well as give it. I also look for opportunities to continue practicing unconditional love, when appropriate. I help others without expecting anything in return. I try to love my neighbor (*Mt 19:19 NIKJ*), walk that extra mile, and turn the other cheek. (*Mt 5:39-41*). I will just not bear all things within the context of marriage unless my husband is doing the same.

Author's note: For more information about this I refer you to, *Love Must be Tough*, by James Dobson (Word Publishing). Mr. Dobson, a Christian psychologist, explains in great detail why some people respond in a negative and unhealthy way to unconditional love.

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