

If I don't help them,

They won't love me

By Dave Batty

“But they won't love me any more!”

The pain. The desperation in those words from a mother trying to help her 21 year old daughter.

Fearful of driving a deeper wedge into an already troubled relationship, this mom had gone down the path of compromise.

Giving in to the manipulation of a daughter who demanded help in one crisis after another. Feeling stabbed in the heart every time she hears the words, “If you had raised me right, I wouldn't be in this crisis today!”

This mom had been an alcoholic when she raised her daughter. She had plenty of regrets as she looked back on how she had raised her daughter.

Now a Christian, she had an even greater desire to help her daughter who was trapped in addiction to alcohol and drugs.

But this mom was struggling with the reality that her help was not really solving the problems for her daughter. Each time she rescued her daughter from jail or paid the overdue rent, her daughter was soon back into the old lifestyle.

Friends advised her to stop rescuing her daughter—“Let her face the painful consequences of her bad decisions.”

But this advice only deepened the pain within the mom. “If I don't help my daughter, then I'm failing as a mother,” she stated. The “tough love” response was too painful to consider. After all, doesn't God want us to love others unconditionally?

“If ever there was a time my daughter needed me—now is that time. I have to show her that I love her, and help her now.” She felt she had to make up for lost time—for all those years she had failed to be the loving mother her daughter had so desperately needed growing up.

To say “no” to the urgent cries of her daughter would be one more example of betrayal. “If I don't help her, she won't love me any more,”

concluded this mom. And so the painful cycle continued through more months, one crisis after another.

Hard boundaries

What makes it so hard for parents to put hard boundaries in place for their children? Fear stalks the dark places of the present and future. “What if I say, ‘No,’ and then

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she ends up in prison? Or worse—what if she dies? Then I'll have to live with the pain of knowing I drove her to that place of death.”

So what is the way out of this conflict? How can you show love to that family member or friend caught in an addiction or other life-controlling problem? What impact do my actions have on others loving me?

The emotional ties of these close relationships can feed the confusion in our minds to the point that we miss the truth of God's pattern for us to show genuine love.

❖ **Do I fall short of showing God's love when I say “no” and do not help?**

❖ **Is love the key to helping your loved one who has a life-controlling problem?**

❖ **What is more important than unconditional love?**

We all need someone to love us. These expressions of love need to be more than warm fuzzy thoughts in someone's brain. We need others to show by their words and actions that they love us. So who loves you? How do they show this love?

Now to the other side of this issue. Does their love for you motivate you to love them back? How do you show others that you love them?

If the one who loves you is an emotionally healthy person, then the love given and the love received create a healthy, loving relationship. This friendship has great potential for growth and a sense of mutual satisfaction.

But if the one you are loving is trapped in an addiction or other life-controlling problem, then your expressions of love can lead to very different results. Instead of a healthy, loving relationship, love becomes a one-way street with you doing all the giving, and the other person doing all the taking. Your expressions of love can lead to the unintended consequence of feeding their problems instead of moving this person toward healing, balance, wholeness and stability.

Is love the key to helping your loved one?

"Love is the key for healing and growth in the life of your loved one with a problem." Sounds great—but is that statement always true? You can easily look around and find examples where love has been the key to healing and growth.

But in this statement lies part of the confusion for the one showing love. Love in action does not automatically lead to healing and growth. Expressions of love can open

the door for positive change. But opening the door of potential is radically different from real healing and growth.

A doctor in Minnesota died and left his wife a comfortable financial estate to provide for the rest of her life. Right after the funeral her daughter asked for financial help—and so the mom sent her several thousand dollars.

The first request was soon followed by a second, and a third. Each time the daughter had some special need. This pattern went on for several years.

Now the mother was reaching out for advice from a counselor. "I

How can you show love to someone without becoming part of their problems?

just don't know what to do," was the painful concern of this mother. "My daughter just asked for another \$5,000.00."

She went on to explain that her deceased husband's provision of hundreds of thousands of dollars was almost gone—with only \$65,000 left.

"How often does your daughter ask for money?" asked the counselor. She responded, "Every month or so, and sometimes more than once a month."

"How old is your daughter?" Mom replied that her daughter was in her early 40s.

"Where does your daughter live?" —on the east coast.

The counselor asked the mother, "Have you considered saying 'no' to

her requests, and then explaining why you can't help her any more?"

The mother instantly replied, "Oh, I can't do that! She would stop loving me."

The pain of even thinking of losing the love of her daughter blinded her from seeing the problem she had been feeding since the death of her husband. She failed to see that those closest to her—who should be loving her—were actually betraying her and taking cruel advantage of her expressions of love.

After losing the one she had loved the most, this mother was desperately trying to hold on to the love of her daughter. But she wasn't buying love—she was simply pouring this money down a bottomless problem pit.

God's pattern for love

So how does one find a way out of this confusion? How can you show love to someone without becoming part of their problems?

First, God does want us to love our family. This love needs to mirror His love for us. Jesus showed His love for us long before we responded with love to Him. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6,8 NIV)

His expressions of love were not conditioned on our response. He was willing to put His love into action—even very painful actions—to demonstrate His commitment to love fully.

And here is where most of us begin to confuse the truth about how we should love those close to us. "If

Jesus loved unconditionally, then so should I. That's the highest expression of love."

That statement is partly true. Every parent knows that you have to love your young child even though they do not love you back. When you are changing that dirty diaper for the 100th time, does your child say, "Thank you so much. I really love you." No—but you keep on loving, hoping that as your child grows up, he or she will appreciate all you have done for them and begin to love you.

When the teenage years arrive, your love is put to the test again. Many teens rebel. But you stand on the hope that with time the relationship will improve. And often it does get better. You can look around and see lots of college age children growing in their appreciation of mom and dad. A whole new dimension characterizes their communication.

These wonderful examples around us can feed the belief, "If you just keep loving them, eventually it will all work out."

But it's just not true. There are plenty of godly parents who have

Feeling guilty for not helping your loved one?

Many parents carry a heavy sense of responsibility to help their children, especially when they get in trouble.

That son or daughter can put daggers to the heart when they say, "What kind of a Christian are you? I thought Christians are supposed to help people in trouble!"

But saying "No" can be the godly response, even when it doesn't feel right. Tough love many times doesn't feel like love.

loved their children deeply who still have broken relationships with their child who is now an adult, caught up in addiction and life-controlling problems.

So where is the truth? What is the answer for those who so desperately want a loving relationship with their child?

Obedient love

The mistake we can make is to attempt to show unconditional love to those close to us. But what God is looking for is obedient love.

Our attempt to show unconditional love can, in reality, be rebellious love, arrogant love. Love that says, "I know what is best. I'll show love the way I want to. No one is going to tell me how to love my child!"

The solution lies, not in unconditional love, but in obedient love. We must learn how to love our children the way God wants us to.

We must learn how to submit this relationship with our child to God, and learn how to obey God regarding this relationship.

So where should you start?

God is looking for you to place your highest priority on loving Him. That is the greatest command in the Bible—to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. (Mark 12:30)

Jesus said that our love for God should be so intense that when we compare it to how we love our children or other family members—it looks like we hate them. (Luke 14:26)

Our second priority is to love those God has placed in our lives. God wants each parent to love their child with great passion—just as God directs them to do.

Conditional love

The first and most powerful expression of mature love is that it is conditional. What is the condition of mature love? The most important condition is "God, how do you want me to show love to my child?"

This is the key to true expressions of love—whether your child is healthy and doing great, or whether your child is caught up in an addiction or some other life-controlling problem.

The condition for loving your child should not be, "I'll love you if you love me back." Or, I'll love you

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if you are good. Equally dangerous and untrue is the logic—if I love my child, then he or she will love me back.

The truth is, you can't buy love. You can't earn love. True love is given—freely and unconditionally. But wait—not unconditionally—mature love is given obediently!

Obedient love is given in response to God's direction. "God, how do you want me to express love to my child?" So how does a person get God's direction on the appropriate ways to love your child who has an addiction or a life-controlling problem?

We have to surrender our agenda and our desires to God and say, "I'll do whatever you want me to do. If you want me to give money to them, I will. If you want me to do nothing—I will do nothing. If you want me to call the police, and turn

them in for drug use, I will do that.”

The Bible has many scriptures that talk about how to love others—1 Corinthians 13 and Luke 6:27-36 are only two of them. What you must do is bring this relationship to the Lord and say, “I deeply care about this person, but most of all, I want to love you first. Then show me how I can appropriately love this person.”

Obedient love is going to accomplish God's purpose in the life of your loved one.

So where is the list of do's and don'ts when it comes to loving your child who has a problem? I don't have that list. But God has that list for you.

Love God first, and He will help you discover the best ways to love your child. And you will be able to say, “I really want this person to love me. But I am already loved by God, and that's all I need. Anyone else who chooses to love me—well, that's extra—that's frosting on the cake.”

When you choose to make obedience to God your top priority, you can do the hard expressions of love to your child. You will also begin to see that you can't make someone love you—only God can touch their heart and give them the love to share with you and others. If your son or daughter never loves you—God's love for you is still all you need.

“Harsh words,” you say. “Dave, you have no idea the pain I live with, seeing my son or daughter in such problems.” You are right—I can't say I understand your pain. But Jesus understands—because He loved each one of us long before we loved Him. And He's fierce rejection—not just from one son or daughter—He's experienced that rejection thousands of times. He knows best how to help you through this difficult season of your life.

If I don't help them, they won't love me 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 the specific details of past sins, failures, or personal experiences. Even though this entire article focused on a how a parent relates to their child, the same principles relate to any family member or close friend.

1. Do you struggle with the fear, “What if I say, ‘No,’ and then my child (or other loved one) ends up in prison? Or worse, what if s/he dies?”
2. Read Luke 9:59-62.
 - A. Have there been times when you have had to make a choice between loving God and obeying Him vs. doing things for your family?
 - B. How difficult is it to choose between loving God and loving your family members?
3. Have you experienced family members demanding your help or in other ways abusing your acts of kindness and love? How did you feel as a result?
4. Read Galatians 6:7-8. How can your acts of love for family members work against what God wants to do in the life of your loved ones?



Global Teen Challenge
P.O. Box 511
Columbus, GA 31902 USA
Phone: 706-576-6555
E-mail: gtc@Globaltc.org
Website: www.Globaltc.org

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