

The Dangers of Enabling - A Christian Perspective

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I don't think I leave a diaconate conversation without hearing about the struggle deacons face regarding helping vs. hurting, enabling vs. empowering, rebuking vs. compassion. Whatever words we use to describe the debate, the fact is deacons are in the battle everyday of discerning what appropriate help looks like when faced with benevolent situations and they are torn between a plethora of emotions. "How do I help a person who continues to seek assistance; someone who is a decade of challenges; a person who continues to make bad choices; someone who lies and has broken trust, someone who is just looking for a handout and will agree to anything just to receive the assistance? How do I model Christ's love and uphold the law; how do I say 'no' with confidence; how do I discern appropriately when I feel misled, lied to and hurt? How do I disarm the cynical feelings that creep in when someone calls on me for help? How do I empower when enabling is so much easier, at least short term?"

Understanding the impact of enabling begins with understanding what enabling is. Enabling is offering the wrong kind of help. Enabling is rescuing someone so they don't experience the painful consequences of their irresponsible decisions. Enabling is anything that stands in the way of someone experiencing the consequences of their own behavior. Enabling is feeding the problem and working against the work that God is doing in someone's life. Think about it; do we ever consider first how God might be at work in a person's life before we offer immediate assistance? When we try to figure out how to help someone, do we think about how the help we offer stands in the way of God's plan of restoration and redemption in a person's life? Do we place so much emphasis on our own emotions of pressure, guilt, frustration, power and determination to change someone that we forget to consider and think about what God may be doing? Are we standing in God's way?

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

Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit.

When we enable do we "mock the justice of God?" Hurting people are a very real part of this world and deacons in the church are called to be on the journey with people in pain even when it seems endless and hopeless. So now what...if we don't enable what should we do?

Let's consider pain and hurt in a medical sense. If you were in physical pain and sought out medical intervention would a physician treat your pain without asking questions or would you be asked questions to help get at the cause of the pain? How often doesn't a physician prescribe two steps to a treatment plan; 1) help with immediate discomfort and 2) a long-term treatment plan to help with the cause? So when deacons are asked to become involved in a benevolent situation, how can thinking like a physician help us to discern the appropriate response? Would asking clarifying questions be helpful in understanding the cause that created the crisis? Would having a clearer understanding of the cause help us with the treatment plan acknowledging that sometimes taking care of immediate pain to help move toward long-term healing is necessary?

As you continue to serve the Lord as a deacon, pray for wisdom in knowing just how God would want you to respond and above all, no matter what the response, ask yourself "how have I left the footprints of Jesus on this life." God bless you deacons.