

Accountability: Part 2

In Part 1 of this two-part series, we unpacked the definition of accountability and looked at it in the context of a church. If you have no one to examine you after exposure to the Word of God, your obedience does not have the safe-guards it needs. It's open-ended, and so will likely happen at a much slower rate than if you yielded to the accountability God intended you to have. It may even be bound to fail.

Accountability in the church is when you voluntarily place yourself in under the watchful eye of other believers to be lovingly held to the standard of the Bible. It should always go hand-in-hand with instruction from the Word. There is to be the standard proclaimed, but also the supervision and correction of those who disobey the Word. The church should be a place to hear the Word, but also a means to ensure we live it.

Why do we need accountability? Because the flesh is deceitful – it lies to itself, and it lies to others. It needs to be held accountable or it will go its own way. We all need a Nathan-figure in our lives to reveal to us our disobedience. Nathan the prophet was sent by God to expose King David to himself. David had reasoned away his sin, and it took the wise use of a parable for him to see what he had done and who he had become.

Without accountability, we slide towards lukewarmness. Our spiritual lives suffer from entropy – they wind down. We need constant encouragement, repetition, supervision and correction if we are to become what God wants us to be.

Accountability entails aspects like regular meeting with God's people. As **Hebrews 10:24-25** entreats, *"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."*

When a person removes themselves from fellowship, it is the first sign of an inadequate view of the flesh. The public preaching of the Word, counselling sessions, one-on-one discipleship, group Bible studies, close relationships between believers – these are all important to have the instruction and the supervision we need. The standard needs to be proclaimed to us – not privately, where we can pretend to orchestrate change on our own terms and at our own pace – but publicly. In this way, believers in the church all hear the same message, and all can see what effect it is having in one another's lives.

Accountability also entails submission to Christ's Lordship as found in His Word and in the teaching of it by His people. Consider Jesus' words in **Luke 6:46**: *"But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?"* There can be no accountability until God's people agree they are all under Christ's Lordship, and are thus willing to follow His Word. As long as personal opinion, preference or tradition are the authority, accountability is a lost cause.

Then there needs to be the willingness to be corrected and confronted. **Proverbs 12:15** tells us: *"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But he who heeds counsel is wise."* Until believers recognise that God authorises other believers to wield the Word correctly and apply it to each other's lives, we will cut off a large source of change and growth in our lives. The modern independent spirit is fatal to Christian growth as God intended it to occur.

Parallel to that, there needs to be the willingness to correct and confront others. *"Open rebuke is better Than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful,"* says **Proverbs 27:5-6**. It is difficult to correct someone when you fear their negative reaction. But God calls on us to do it. But that leads us to ask another question – on what issues are we to correct one hold one another accountable?

1 Peter 4:8 tells us that love covers a multitude of sins. God does not expect us to reprove or correct each other on every inconsistency, every minor flaw, every sin we ever detect in one another. If that were the case, there would be little time for anything else. So when must we go to another believer and call them to the standard of the Word of God?

When to hold a fellow believer accountable

1. We are charged to hold one another accountable whenever we see a brother or sister falling or trapped in a pattern of sin. **Galatians 6:1** says, *"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."* The word for "overtaken" here means to be trapped. The person has been ensnared; they have fallen. It is clear that apart from intervention, they are not going to get back up. Their sin has got them in a place where they need to be extricated if they are to continue. The word for "restore" here is actually a word used for mending broken bones.
2. We are charged to hold one another accountable if a believer sins against us directly, and it is not something that can be overlooked in patient love. In other words, they have sinned against us, and it is grievous enough that both you and they will suffer if it is not put right. We see this in **Matthew 18:15**: *"Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother."*
3. We must admonish one another continually in a general sense. Colossians 3:16 tells us to be teaching and admonishing one another. As relationships deepen and cement, there is space to probe one another, with permission.

However, here are some things to bear in mind.

- **Take into consideration your relationship to that person** (age, spiritual maturity, marital status, gender) if the issue is not an immediate issue of sin against you. Sometimes your relationship to that person makes your reproof either inadequate or inappropriate. If you lack the intimacy of relationship to truly establish what is going on, your reproof may miss the mark by a mile. A mere surface-level observation needs to remain that unless more concrete evidence of unrepentant sin becomes clear.

If you are in totally different stages of life, your reproof may be inappropriate. A sixteen-year-old may see problems in the marriage of two retired people at church, but for him to reprove them would be inappropriate. We see something of this in **1 Timothy 5:1-2**: *"Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger as sisters, with all purity."* Paul is not saying, 'do not hold some people accountable.' But he is teaching Timothy to recognise age and gender distinctions and to treat each one appropriately. That does not mean we create 'classes' in the church. It means we recognise God-given differences and honour them as we hold each other accountable.

- **Differentiate between issues of preference and issues of disobedience.** Sometimes somebody may well have liberty in the Lord to act a particular way. Because it does not appeal to you does not make it an issue of disobedience with them. In those cases, you need to act with deference. Accountability is not to get people to conform to your personality. It is to hold them to the clearly revealed will of God contained in the Word.

Along the same lines, you must recognise the difference between rebellion and immaturity. A believer may be sinning, but truly seeking to battle that sin. For them to be reproved just at the time they are battling this thing may be the straw that breaks the camel's back. Differentiate between a believer who is growing and tripping as they grow, and one who is in a pattern of stubborn rebellion. Paul instructs us to make this distinction in the way we treat different believers at varying stages: *"And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all,"* (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

- **Recognise that some issues are none of your business.** If there is an issue between two people, perhaps you ought not to know about it. **Proverbs 25:9** says, *"Argue your case with your neighbour himself, and do not reveal another's secret."* If the way you came to know their sin was by gossip, it is none of your business and you must steer clear of being involved and of repeating the matter to others. Remember, the circle of knowledge for a sin should remain as small as the sin itself – it needs be no wider than the ones the sin has affected or been observed by. Public sins require public repentance.

Having said that, some accountability would be appropriate given age or gender differences, which leads us to the question: to whom am I accountable? To whom must I answer?) We are not all accountable to each other to the same degree. Generally – believers should know that our actions affect one another: *"So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another,"* (Romans 12:5).

More specifically, God charges certain men to exercise oversight of your life – pastors and overseers, who must in turn give an account for you: *"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you,"* (Hebrews 13:17). This verse tells us that spiritual leaders are authorised by God to supervise and correct. The more you forge ties with your spiritual leaders, the more you avail yourself of this form of spiritual oversight.

The most consistent and perhaps intensive form of accountability comes in a one-on-one discipleship relationships: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age,"* (Matthew 28:19-20). We are to be teaching one another the Word of God so as to cause one another to grow into the image of Jesus Christ.

How should we practice this kind of supervision and correction?

1. **Consider yourself.** As **Matthew 7:3-5** reminds us, *"And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."* So take the beam out of your own eye first, so as to clearly discern another's sin. Know your own frailty, and yield yourself to God as a sinner surrendering to help another sinner.

Galatians 6:1 also tells us to consider ourselves when we go to restore another person. The only way for accountability to work is when it rises above the level of picking on one another's fault so as to score points. It must be sinners in need of change, helping other sinners in need of change. And the first pre-requisite is to make sure you are dealing with sin in your own life. Use a microscope for sin in your own life, use normal vision for sin in your brother or sister's life.

2. **Use Scripture and keep things focused on God's requirements.** The idea is to keep a person in conversation with the Word of God. It is not to be about what you want, but about what God wants. If they have submitted themselves to the Lordship of Christ, there will be no excuses like, "Well, that's just your interpretation of that verse" or "Well, I'm not under the law anymore, I'm under grace." The standard is the Word of God, and you are to simply be a channel.
3. **Use meekness. Galatians 6:1** tells us to restore another person with meekness. Fusing a broken bone can be a delicate procedure, and calling a believer to stop sinning and follow Christ can be as well. That is why meekness will mean patient responses, longsuffering, tactful words, persuasive words, gentle words, thoughtful timing, tolerance of another. There should be nothing in the delivery of the correction that could be faulted.
4. **Emphasise restoration.** The goal of accountability is not to make someone squirm, but to encourage them to repent. The whole attitude should be one of calling a person to walking with Christ, not of merely condemning them for their sin. Condemnation is God's prerogative, ours is to call sin what it is in another's life and urge them to repent.
5. Do not involve others prematurely. Again, **Proverbs 25:9** tells us, *"Argue your case with your neighbour himself, and do not reveal another's secret."* The time to begin involving others is when the accountability you apply is rejected out of hand.

What do you do if another rejects your reproof or correction?

1. **Pray for them.** *"If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that," (1 John 5:16).* Similarly, take heart at **James 5:16**, which says, *"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."* Keep in mind that if holding them accountable is something God wants you to do, then you are not on your own. You should pray for God's work in that person's heart, for a softening, a humbling, a yielding to God's Word.
2. **Re-examine if you have all the facts straight.** Perhaps your reproof was a little misguided, or you misinterpreted the facts. You should always do fact-finding before you apply correction, but having spoken with them and heard their responses, humbly go over the situation again. Ask, 'Do I have it right? Is there something I am missing?' Remember **Proverbs 15:28**, *"The heart of the righteous studies how to answer, But the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil."*
3. If you conclude that you were right in your initial estimation, then **try again, when the time is right:** *"A man has joy by the answer of his mouth, and a word spoken in due season, how good it is!" (Proverbs 15:23).* Sometimes timing is all-important. Choose the best time to speak to a person, a time in which they will be most receptive. Do not leave the follow-up for too long, but do not rush it either. Give a person time to digest and think on what you have shared.
4. **Realise that change is by the Holy Spirit**, not by you (**2 Corinthians 3:18**). We are instruments of change, not agents of change. The Holy Spirit changes a person, not us or our words.
5. **Determine the severity of their actions.** We looked at **1 Thessalonians 5:14** earlier. One must decide, having spoken to them – are they fainthearted, requiring exhortation? Are they idle or unruly, needing a warning? Are they weak, needing you to uphold them? Determine if they are battling this thing, or if they are in stubborn, defiant, wilful sin.

6. **If necessary, take the next step** of Matthew 18. That is, take a silent witness with you to observe this person's response to your reproof, and to observe how you are administering that reproof. Only if that person corroborates the fact that this person is unrepentant, do you take it to the next level of taking it to the church.

We should close off by turning the tables on ourselves.

How are we to receive correction?

1. **Receive correction with patience.** *"So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God," (James 1:19-20).* And later, in the same book: *"But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy," (James 3:17).* Selfish anger defeats any attempt for the Word of God to implant in your heart. When another holds you accountable, you must not react rashly; be slow to anger, listen carefully.
2. **Do a genuine inward search.** *"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting," (Psalm 139:23-24).* Consider what they are saying. Pray for God to open your eyes and to show you your sin if this is the case. Ask for more time if necessary – sometimes we need time to digest what has been said.
3. **Receive with gratitude.** *"Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities," (Psalm 141:5).* Thank the person for being willing to step out of their comfort zone and challenge you to live out the Word of God.
4. **Respond carefully.** *"The ear that hears the rebukes of life will abide among the wise. He who disdains instruction despises his own soul, but he who heeds rebuke gets understanding" (Proverbs 15:31-32).* Own what is yours. When someone points out something that is true of you, acknowledge that much. Not much fruit comes from vigorously denying what is untrue. If the correction is untrue, then forgive the person for believing wrong things about you. Glean what you can from their rebuke, as there may be a grain of wheat among the chaff.

The modern church has lost much of its power due to how it treats the Word. For many, it is their lack of true expository preaching – letting the Word of God speak. But beyond that, there is a shirking of the responsibility to hold one another to the standard of the Word of God. It seems too personal, too involved, for many a church's liking – so they step back and resign themselves to simply give out a message a week.

In this series, we have seen how desperately we need accountability. Christian, make sure you find yourself in a church which holds its members to the standard of the Word of God. Make sure in such a church that you are playing your part of giving correction where appropriate, and receiving it in a Christlike way.