

Accountability Groups

by Jonathan Dodson

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Put ten bucks in the jar to keep from sinning.

When I recall some of the popular discipleship disciplines I advocated in college, I shudder. Did I really think that they were *biblical* or even helpful?

When one of my disciples caved into a particular sin he was “being held accountable for,” he had to put ten bucks in the jar. Sounds awfully close to an indulgence doesn’t it? Yet, in our aim to promote “holiness,” ten bucks was the penalty for pandering to sin. We thought this approach to accountability was especially good for fighting sexual sin. If one of the guys I disciplined had a particularly lustful week, (viewing inappropriate TV, reading pornographic material, or masturbating), he had to “pay the price.”

When we met for our weekly accountability meeting, I would ask a range of questions designed to promote accountability, but as I recall, we only assigned sexual sins the steep penalty of ten dollars. “Other sins” were considered less grievous. Sometimes the accumulated cash was put in the offering, other times it was used to celebrate “not sinning” over dinner. Somehow, this practice was supposed to motivate holy living, but instead, it fostered a legalism that undercut a more biblical approach to fighting sin.

Maybe you’ve had a similar experience with an **Accountability Group—gatherings in which brothers and sisters in Christ meet together to encourage one another in their journey toward holiness, toward Christ-likeness.**

Ideally, these groups promote Christian obedience by promoting biblical standards and providing an environment of grace in which we “work out our salvation.” Accountability groups foster the pain of confessing sin and the joy of conquering it. Put more positively, accountability groups typically seek to foster personal holiness and faith in Christ through corporate confession, discussion and prayer—a noble aim.

Thankfully, my accountability experience and practice has improved with time. In fact, wherever I have lived, I have sought out brothers in order to form a group committed to pursuing joy-deepening, God-glorifying accountability. In these groups I have discovered a depth of fellowship that goes unmatched, a well-spring of counsel that feeds my soul, and a sturdy refuge of accountability that strengthens my faith and promotes holy living. Over the past couple of years, our meetings have been especially encouraging. This has been due, in part, to our attempts to avoid the extremes described in this article and by practicing an alternative, more biblical approach to holiness. For this, I thank God.

Whether you have had a positive, negative, or no experience with accountability groups, one thing we all have in common is the struggle against mixed motives and deficient discipleship in our pursuit of holiness.

God-Honoring Accountability

Because many accountability groups tend to drift towards legalism or moralism, we need a biblical alternative to help us set a soul-satisfying, God-honoring course for holiness. This accountability can take many forms. My aim here is not to propose another model. Instead, I will suggest several key principles which, if applied, can foster sound and soul-stirring accountability. These principles operate on a fundamental presupposition, namely the forgiveness of our sins through the cross of Christ.

God-honoring accountability does not circumvent the cross. Instead, it draws all of us toward holiness through faith in its sufficiency for both victory and defeat. If we fail, Christ offers us forgiveness through the cross. If we succeed, it is because Christ has made us new creatures through the cross. The sacrifice of Christ has purchased both our holiness and our forgiveness. Therefore, whether we stumble or succeed in pursuit of holiness, we are dependent upon Christ. As a result, this Christ-centered presupposition should promote accountability groups that rely heavily upon the promises of forgiveness and of holiness.

Legalism and Confessional Booth Accountability

Although the aim of accountability groups is good, the practice is often misguided. Accountability groups often smack of legalism. Failures to trust and cherish God are punished through graduated penalties (an increased tithe, buying lunch or coffee for the “partners,” or unspoken ostracism from one’s peers). Instead of holding one another accountable to trusting God, we become accountable for exacting punishments on one another. The unfortunate result is a kind of legalism in which the healing of confession and the power of God’s promises are substituted by peer prescribed punishments. As a result, our motives for holiness get warped. Confession in such contexts is relegated to “keeping from doing it,” making discipleship a duty-driven, rule-keeping journey.

Alternatively, accountability groups can devolve into a kind of confessional booth from which we depart absolved of any guilt, fearing merely the passing frown of our fellow priest. I confess my sin; you confess yours. I pat your back. You pat mine. Then we pray. Accountability groups become circles of cheap grace through which we obtain cheap peace from a troubled conscience. This approach to holiness backfires and we begin to take Christless comfort in the confession of sin. As a result, confession is divorced from repentance, reducing holiness to half-hearted morality. Accountability becomes a man-made mix of moralism and cheap peace.

Don’t get me wrong; confession is good and biblical: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5.16; cf. 1 John 1.9). It’s a means of grace for spiritual healing, not something we do in order to regain God’s approval. It’s relating to our Holy Father in authenticity and is a holy act itself (not something we do to position ourselves for holiness). The problem arises when we lose sight of holiness and we turn confession into a purely horizontal act, making it an impersonal ritual.

Motivation for Holiness

With legalistic accountability, the main motivation for not sinning is punishment or embarrassment. We refrain from sinning because we don’t want to lose something or to be embarrassed by confessing our sin to a friend. Confessional booth accountability empties the power of holiness by hollowing its motivation. Earnestness for holiness is replaced by ritual regurgitation of our sin. Whether we drift toward the confessional booth or legalistic forms of accountability, we diminish the seriousness of sin and forsake holiness. These actions separate us from the joy of Lord. In short, we substitute ritual for righteousness.

This, of course, is nothing new. Scripture is filled with examples of substituting ritual for righteousness. In the days of the Judges, when “there was no king in Israel and everyone did

what was right in his own eyes,” idol-worshipping Micah thought adding a personal priest to his shrine would curry favor with God (Judg. 17-18). Instead, God threatened his life and family and took away his precious idols. Jesus constantly indicted the Pharisees for their empty religion and preoccupation with ceremony over substance: “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness” (Luke 11.39). Paul corrected the Colossians for their reliance on strict diets and body-belittling practices as a means to gaining favor with God (Col. 2.20-23).

So what’s the big deal? What’s at stake in our distorted forms of accountability, in hollowed pursuits of holiness? First, we short-circuit our relationship with the Trinity; we don’t trust our Father; we sell out the Son’s sacrifice, and we slight the Spirit. Second, in addition to trivializing the Trinity, we settle for the fleeting pleasure of peer approval or cheap peace when we could have “pleasures forevermore” in our relationship with God (Ps. 16.11). Third, we displace Christ from our Christianity by either relying on our rituals or the fear of man to motivate holiness. By sidestepping Jesus, we dishonor God and demean His gracious provision.

In order to avoid the confessional booth mentality and legalistic accountability, two things are necessary. First, take Scripture warnings seriously. When God says, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12.14), He means it! Gathering together to remind one another of the imperative of holiness is good and necessary. Second, remember and heed the powerful and precious promises of God (2 Peter 1.4). God’s promises aren’t meant for measuring; they’re for trusting. His promises are the path to true pleasure. They are the way to worship. God Himself is bent on pursuing our pleasure through His holiness: “but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness” (Heb. 12.10-11).

Did you catch that? **The infinite God of the universe is committed to our good, even in discipline!** He pursues our true pleasure, knowing that when we trust Him we become like Him; we become holy. When we trust in His promises, God is glorified and we are satisfied.¹ Our happiness is bound up with His holiness.

How can we pursue this holiness in accountable relationships? What might such a pursuit look like within a group of like-minded brothers or sisters?

An Alternative

In my personal accountability journey, the writings of the great Puritan pastor and theologian, John Owen, have been tremendously helpful. In particular, I have drawn from Owen’s *On the Mortification of Sin* and *On Temptation*.² In his preface to *Mortification* (an old word meaning “to put to death”), Owen articulates the purpose for his writing on the subject:

*that mortification and universal holiness may be promoted in my own and in the hearts and ways of others, to the glory of God; so that the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ may be adorned in all things.*³

Owen sets the mortification of sin in its rightful place—as a means to glorifying God and making much of the gospel of Christ. Mortification is not a morbid end in itself. Therefore, if *our* aim in

¹ John Piper has pointed out that by relying on the promises of God’s grace we are satisfied and He is magnified. In short, faith in the promises of God is a delighting in all that God is for us in Jesus. For an application of this truth to a grace-oriented, promise-trusting approach to holiness, see Piper’s *Future Grace*: (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1995).

² All references to Owen’s writings are from *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 6, ed. William H. Goold (Bath, England: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850-53; rep., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000).

³ John Owen, *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, 4.

accountability and personal mortification is not gospel-centered and God-glorifying, these principles will be easily perverted into rules for self-righteousness.

Owen anchors his reflections on mortification using Romans 8.13: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you *put to death* the deeds of the body, you will live.” Here he notes that, while it is our responsibility to mortify the “deeds of the body,” it is only made possible through the sovereign enablement of the Spirit. Thus, mortification is characterized by our effort and the Spirit’s enablement. As we take seriously the warnings and actively trust in the promises of God, like Romans 8.13, we access the power of God in Christ through the Spirit to triumph over sin and temptation. Using Owen as a guide, I will suggest three principles that foster God-honoring, gospel-adorning accountability.

Three Principles for Accountability Groups

1. Identification: *Know thy Sin.*⁴

Identify and share your personal patterns of sin and places of temptation with others you trust. For example:

- Do you frequently find yourself tempted to vanity when shopping for clothes or looking in the mirror?
- Does sexual lust creep in on late, lonely nights watching TV?
- Are you prone to pride when hearing compliments or receiving praise?
- Do you encounter habitual self-doubt and self-centeredness when confronted with failure?

Share these patterns of temptation with your friends and confess your sin to God, asking for forgiveness. Confession breaks the power of private sin. By going public with our unbelief we heighten the tension between sin and holiness, fostering the mindset of mortification. Consider reading through any of Paul’s vice lists (Gal. 5.19-21, for example) asking the Spirit to convict you of those sins that are deep-seated and need mortification. Ask your friends to help you mortify sin by reminding you to avoid these patterns and places of unbelief. Knowing our sin is the first principle in mortification.

2. Mortification: *Be killing sin lest it be killing you.*⁵

Once we have identified our sins, we are poised to strike them down. However, sin, Satan, and temptation do not give up easily. Owen reminds us of the relentless foe we face when he writes: “Be killing sin lest it be killing you.” Mortification is an active approach to holiness, something that, when done in community, strengthens our resolve to cherish the promises of God over the fleeting promises of sin. So how do we kill sin? Owen outlines three key elements for killing sin: 1) habitual weakening of sin 2) constant fighting 3) victory in the Spirit. We might summarize these elements as follows: **Mortification is a habitual weakening of sin through constant fighting and contending in the Spirit for victory over the flesh.**

How can we habitually weaken sin? We can weaken sin by knowing its strategy. For instance, if you know that you are prone to vanity, you can avoid temptation by refusing to linger on your reflection in mirrors, windows, and pictures. If you struggle with pride, you can make a practice of silently praising God every time someone compliments you. By strategizing against the strategy of sin, we weaken the effects of sin in our lives. Constant fighting is critical to

⁴ Owen, *On Temptation*, 131-32.

⁵ Owen, *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, 9.

mortification. This means that we do not coast in our walk with God. Instead, we believe the saying, “Be killing sin lest it be killing you.” The best way to cultivate this kind of earnestness is to take God’s warnings seriously. This means we don’t skip over texts like Galatians 5.19-21:

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Instead, we pause and invite the Spirit’s conviction. We linger over the sins contained in these lists and seek opportunity for conviction and repentance, grace and forgiveness. Moreover, we contemplate the reward and loss of gaining or losing the kingdom. Owen and the Puritans were exemplary in this regard, devoting time to contemplate the horrors of hell and the happiness of heaven. In addition, continually ask God for earnestness in fighting sin and believing his Word. Victory in the Spirit comes through various means of grace. Victory over sin often comes by stockpiling promises from Scripture to meditate on. Seek regular fellowship with believers. Make use of means of grace like God-centered music and God-revealing creation. Set your hands to works that only the Spirit can enable you to do. Look for opportunities to serve others and enjoy godly leisure. Consider the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.22-23, and cultivate it. Victory in Spirit comes through walking in the Spirit and bearing His fruit.

The three elements of mortification are progressive and overlapping. If we habitually weaken sin by seeking to identify our places of weakness and temptation, constant fighting follows and victory in the Spirit ensues. As we fight the flesh, we gain victory in the Spirit.

3. Sanctification: *Set thy faith on His promises.*⁶

Although identification and mortification are both technically a part of sanctification, what I have in view here is the faith of sanctification. What role does our faith play in our pursuit of holiness? As Owen suggests, we should set our faith on something, on God’s promises. **All too often we take God’s promises for granted. We read them, but don’t believe them.** Instead of trusting in God’s truth, we often treat it as a mere textbook on doctrine. Other times we pilfer His promises for an experiential buzz, but rarely do we believe and bank on His covenant promises. Corresponding to the sins identified above, believe and bank on His promises:

- *Forsake fleeting beauty and you will bear the beauty of Christ.*
“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is” (1 John 3.2).
- *If you maintain purity of heart, you are promised God!*
“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5.8).
- *If you choose the path of humility, God himself will honor you.*
“Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (1 Peter 5.6).

⁶ Owen, *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, 79, 125-26.

- *If you trust not in your own abilities, but have faith in Christ, you will live like the new creation you are!*
 “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5.17).

His promises are as sure as the blood His Son spilt to secure them. Through these blood-bought promises, God discloses Himself and His power to us. By trusting in them, we access the power of God through the Spirit to weaken sin and mortify the flesh. But what does it look like to trust in the promises of God and how can these principles inform our accountability?

Principles Applied: Encouragement and Confrontation

All three of these principles can and should be applied at an individual level. However, I have found that there is greater consistency and victory when these principles are embraced in community. In my own accountability group, we try to facilitate this kind of approach by structuring our accountability time around mutual encouragement and confrontation. We do so by identifying and mortifying personal sin and spurring one another towards sanctifying trust in the promises of God. Our accountability group looks something like this:

- We aim to diligently identify sinful patterns in our lives and share them with one another.
- We pray for one another about these weaknesses and ask one another each week if we are struggling well.
- We suggest promises to one another that are related to a particular battle.
- We plead with God for earnestness in our pursuit of personal holiness, which is fostered by a shared commitment to the mortification of sin.
- In all of this we strive to be governed and guided by grace.

In a recent accountability meeting I shared that I had identified an impending temptation of lust. Since my wife was about to have our first child, I knew that selfish sexual temptation would likely follow the birth, so I conveyed my concerns to the group. Instead of facing the struggle alone, my friends first committed to pray. Later, a brother encouraged me to trust in the promise of Matthew 5.8: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” When temptation came, I considered and trusted this promise—those who cultivate purity of heart will see the living God, that is, enjoy His presence forever in the new heavens and earth. Finally, during a phone conversation after Owen’s birth, that same brother asked me if I was struggling well. The principles applied.

Clearly, the principles of identifying and mortifying sin and exercising sanctifying trust in the promises of God guide good and godly accountability. By gathering together regularly to encourage one another to pursue the happiness that comes with holiness, we can forsake sinful, second-rate pleasures. In addition to believing the warnings and banking on the promises of God, we must be sure to listen, learn, and love, while also praying for one another. Together, with a common commitment to identification, mortification, and sanctification, we can avoid the perils of legalistic accountability and the license of the confessional booth, adorning the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. No need to put ten bucks in the jar.