

**Core Seminar**

**Discipling**

**Class 11: Biblical Accountability**

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# Introduction Picture these scenarios:

* Jonathan struggles with internet pornography, but is ashamed to talk about it.
* Debbie gets angry with her children, but desires to fight the anger.
* Wendy knows she is in an aggressive career, and that if she doesn’t be careful, it will overtake her life.

One of the greatest lies of the evil one is to think that as Christians we can go at it alone—fight sin by our own agenda and by our own strength. Yet, one of the arguments we have been making about discipling is that Christians should never fight alone.

You are in a war for life and death. The battle cannot be won by fighting by yourself. You need help from the Lord Himself provided by the Holy Spirit and through other believers. This is God’s design for your life—to fight side-by-side with others who are struggling to put off sin and look more like Christ.

To that end, we want to spend today thinking about biblical accountability and what it looks like in the life of believers. First remember there is a wickedness in refusing accountability

**Psalms 10:4** In all his scheming, the wicked arrogantly thinks: “There is no accountability, since God does not exist.” (HCSB)

**Christians Should Pursue Accountability**

We start with three biblical reasons why we want pursue accountability.

1. **Scripture Encourages Confession**

**1 John 1:9-10** **9**If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10**If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (ESV)

Confession is helpful because it relieves our burden of guilt and shame. But we don’t do it simply because it makes us feel better.

First and foremost, we confess our sin because the Bible directs us to do so.

Confession of sin starts with God. David cries out to God: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (**Psalm 51:4a**). Our sin as Christians is ultimately an offense before a Holy God. We must run to God first *before* we reconcile with others.

But it is also important to confess sin to other believers. “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” (**James 5:16**).

Healthy discipleship relationships include conversation about sin. Confession is an act of initiating openness and vulnerability about sin before God and with other Christians. It is never an easy thing to do, but the Bible consistently encourages Christians to bring their sin out of the darkness and into the light (John 1:1-5; 3:19-21; 1 John 1:5-7). Sin should never be allowed to hide and persist in the darkness. Bringing sin into the light means exposing it before God and others (Ephesians 5:3-16; see especially verse 11).

Confession of sin brings mercy for the sinner. Solomon writes: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” (**Prov 28:13**).

1. **Scripture Warns Us About Self-Deceit**

Just yesterday, I was switching lanes on the highway, and I almost hit a car that was situated in my “blind spot.” Do you know what a blind spot is? Your rear view mirror cannot see every vehicle that follows behind you. There is one spot where a car can be situated in the next highway lane and it will not be seen in your mirror.

Christians have “blind spots”— ways in which believers live in ignorance of indwelling sin and its harmful effects on their life. *Ignorance* is the key term here. Sin can make me blind to my own faults. Sin causes me to be deceived about the depth and breadth of the problems in my life.

The author of Hebrews writes: “**12**Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. **13**But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” (**Heb 3:12-13**).

Self-deceit affects every Christian. The author of Hebrews warns believers: Take care/Be careful! You can still make foolish choices that led to a sinful, unbelieving heart. Self-deceit leads believers into momentary atheism—moments in which our self-dependence and lack of trust in God leads us to live more according to the world and less according to truth. Richard Sibbes describes two sins as more dangerous than others: “spiritual pride and security.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Don’t be lured away from God by these!

What’s the antidote to self-deceit? According to the author of Hebrews, it is to encourage one another regularly. So, he says, “**13**But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Notice the two ideas that the “so that” connects—encouraging one another daily helps *prevent* a hardening that might come through sin’s deceitfulness. This daily encouragement is an antidote to sin’s deceitfulness. It helps *prevent* the hardening of the heart.

1. **Scripture Encourages Honesty about Weakness**

**Let’s consider 2 Cor 12:9.** Paul is in the midst of a long section in 2 Corinthians where he is defending his apostleship against false apostles that are invading the church. In chapter 11, he talks about boasting, and says: “**18**Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. **30**If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.” (**2 Cor 11:18, 30**). Unlike the flesh, which boasts in its strength, Paul wants to focus on weakness. Why? **Because he knows God works through our weakness**. In chapter 12:7, he talks about a thorn in the flesh that was tormenting him. Paul was not specific about the problem, but whatever it is, Paul pleads with the Lord to take it away. In response, Christ says: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Rather than taking the pain away, God provides grace for Paul to endure the trial. God’s power is shown through Paul’s weakness.Paul’s response: Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. **10**Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties” (12:9-10). Paul will boast about his weakness because it is in weakness that Christ’s power is evident. As God provides grace to go through a trial, you see what strength really is. In contrast to the worlds thinking, where a strength is a strength and a weakness is a weakness, we can see God shows his power in the midst of our weakness. So, very appropriately, Paul concludes: “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10).

How do you view your own weakness? Is it a source of shame or a reason to boast as Paul did about the power of Christ? In contrast to the world, which teaches us to project confidence and boast in our strengths, Paul encourages us (Christians) to be honest about our weakness because it is in our weakness that God shows his strength.

**The Need for Accountability**

In God’s great wisdom, He made us to live in community. That’s why he gave us the church. In his great kindness, God put believers in the middle of covenant communities, where we can hear God’s Word and grow alongside other believers.

Now you might say, “I get plenty encouragement from fellowship at Church and reading God’s Word. I’ve been getting along just fine *without* accountability relationships.”

That fine. If you want to think that way, go ahead. But it’s dangerous. Sin is serious business. Its effects on your life are so pervasive, it goes beyond anything you could imagine. Based on the three Scriptural reasons given above, *my contention is that* a*ccountability is not just advisable, but a necessary part of your Christian growth.* We need other brothers and sisters in Christ to stand alongside of us and help us to see the many ways that sins hurts us. Cf. Read James 5:16, 19-20.

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS]

**Guidelines for Accountability Relationships**

To that end, I want to suggest some guidelines for accountability relationships. To make your accountability relationships effective at digging out the sin that pervades your life, here are nine general principles:

1. **Ask good questions.**

In the Bible, we learn that in order to *really* understand another person, we have to ask good questions. Solomon writes, “The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.” (**Prov 20:5**). To get at the sin, someone has to ask you good questions. In my mind, good questions are *heart-penetrating* questions. They are questions that go beyond the superficial elements of life and “draws out” the sin that sits in the deepest recesses of your heart.

Consider an example of Christian who struggles with lying. You can start by asking fact finding questions to understand the circumstances that surround the sin—When did this problem start? How often do you lie to others? What situations are you more likely to say a lie? But to go deeper, you have to ask more penetrating questions—What are you trying to cover up by your lying? What self-centered motives make you lie to others? What’s the “pay-off” for lying and do you really think it is worth it? How do you plan to give an account to God when you have to explain your lying habits?

1. **Don’t be scared to confront.**

When you see sin in someone else’s life, are you bold enough to confront it?

**Proverbs 26:4-5** says, “**4**Do not answer a fool according to his folly, Or you will also be like him. Answer a fool as his folly deserves, That he not be wise in his own eyes.”

The wise person is talking with the fool and assessing how to respond to the fool. He must not answer a fool’s foolish comment with a foolish comment, or else he will end up like the fool (vs. 4). On the other hand, the wise man must not answer the fool in such a way as to “confirm” the fool’s delusion that he is actually wise (v. 5). The wise person sees how the fool is deceiving himself, and seeks to save him from further self-deception.

One commentator writes, “The wise person must expose the fool’s distortions to serve his own interests at the expense of the community and must not silently accept it and thereby contribute to establishing his topsy-turvy world against the rule of God.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Proverbs 24:6 shows how another person’s vantage point is valuable in deconstructing inaccurate views of ourselves. Because the fool has convinced himself that he is “wise,” he needs the wise person’s help to see his own folly.

1. **Be honest**

There are few things better in this life than an honest answer from a friend and a kiss on the lips from my wife. Solomon writes: **Proverbs 24:26** “Whoever gives an honest answer kisses the lips.” Solomon considered an honest answer to be just as “wonderful” as a kiss.

Honest answers are crucial, or else accountability does not work. You can only care for another person to the extent that the person is willing to be forthright with his life.

What benefits do you reap from honesty? Honesty helps others to see your heart, to know your motives, to assess where you are blind, and to see where you most need help. Without honesty mutual trust can never be built and without trust discipling will not prosper.

1. **Be vulnerable.**

Accountability just does not work if you are not willing be vulnerable. Admittedly, this is hard because it is incredibly uncomfortable having other people getting into “your stuff,” looking at your sin and messing with your life. For accountability to work, you’ve got to let yourself be known to others.

Even though Paul had rebuked the Corinthians for their sin, he had not stopped speaking frankly with them and being open with them. He writes: “Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide.” (**2 Cor 6:11**). Yet, he had to chastise them because they have grown cold towards him and had “closed” their hearts. “12You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. 13Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also.” (**2 Cor 6:12-13**).

For accountability to work, you also have to let others be intrusive. *Intrusive* has a bad connotation in our culture, but I use the word deliberately. It means you need to let people see beyond the superficial, and see some the “deeper” matters of your heart—pride and selfishness, pain and suffering, fear of man, etc. You need to let people speak into those areas, even when you don’t want to hear advice because it could possibly ‘mess up’ your own plans.

1. **Be gracious.**

A Christian husband recently shared with about his desire to get straightforward feedback from his wife. He asked her to be honest about his faults. She took him at his word, and shared some of her struggles with his inconsistent behavior.

He said, “My reaction to her comments was not very gracious. By the way I reacted, you wouldn’t think I had actually asked for the feedback. If I were her, I’d be reluctant to give me feedback again.”

Paul writes in Colossians, “Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (**Col 4:6**). Gracious speech is characterized by a gentle tone (**Prov 15:1**) and a loving attitude **(Eph 4:29)**. Hearing others point to your faults can be painful, uncomfortable, and stressful. You can make a difficult experience a little less difficult by always be gracious in your speech, tone, and attitude.

1. **Be Humble (James 4:6-10)**

An accountability relationship is a meeting between two sinners, both of who need God’s grace and mercy. Haughtiness, arrogance, vengeance, hatred, manipulation—all are self-destructive and ruin genuine, biblical accountability. When you tell others about their sin, you must never do it with a sinful attitude. That’s not to say you are going to be perfect when you address someone else’s sin, but you must always be careful about your own motives when speaking to someone about his/her sin.

Humility is a necessary component of biblical accountability. Humility levels the playing field and says to the other person, “I am a sinner just as desperately in need of God’s grace.” Humility encourages the listener to have an open heart and open ears to what you might say. No one wants to listen to an arrogant person; but to a humble person, many will be willing to listen. Practically one way to do this is by transparency―Let them see your struggles.

1. **Be Encouraging (Acts 15:32)**

Encouragement is an important part of accountability. An honest pursuit of sin can lead to discouragement. Be careful because you can overwhelm a person with his or her sin. Wisdom, prayer, and guidance from others can help us to understand when to speak up about sin and how often. Too much, too soon can be overwhelming. Too little, too infrequently, can lead to superficial accountability. As a discipler, you need to be wise about how you help someone see their own sin. Consider things like: How much can this person handle? Does he/she have ‘ears to hear’ what I need to tell him/her? What encouraging signs of spiritual growth have I seen in them and have I encouraged them with this information?

A relentless pursuit of sin without any mercy leads a person to hopeless Christianity. A relentless pursuit of sin with an abundance of love and encouragement leads to Christ-likeness.

1. **Be Available (Gal 6:10)**

If you don’t have time, don’t let your compassionate heart say “yes” to someone who needs help. Accountability involves a consistent (i.e., weekly) commitment. Meeting too infrequently can be a problem and does occur in this church.

If you don’t have time for someone, you do them no good by saying “yes” if they ask you for help. Only say “yes” if you realistically have the time in your schedule. Accountability and discipleship will be defeated without consistency. Yes, chase them if they need it! (**Rom 14:19**)

1. **Be Word-centered. (Heb 4:12-13)**

There is a danger of limiting discipling relationships to accountability only. Some people get together and spend the majority of their time talking about their sin struggles. While we are obviously supportive of Christians talking about sin, we do not want this to be the only thing that characterizes their relationship.

Accountability relationships should always be word-centered. Even in situations where significant sin needs to be discussed, it’s important as Christians to frequently and quickly bring the conversation back to God’s Word.

Our sin distorts our ability to see life properly. God’s Word helps to correct our faulty vision and to see sin for what it really is—a stumbling block to our relationships with God and others.

**In Conclusion –**

* Good biblical accountability involves asking good questions, not being scared of confrontation, being honest; available; vulnerable; humbling; gracious; and Word-centered.
* Christians must avoid nominal, anonymous Christianity. Biblical accountability is an important and necessary part of spiritual growth.
* Accountability is a part of discipleship not all of it.
* **Mark 12:28-31** **28**One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, “What commandment is the foremost of all?” **29**Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; **30**and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ **31**The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (NASB)
* Finally, In discipleship you are loving God first by loving your neighbor as yourself.

1. Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, first published 1630, rev. ed. 1998), p 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), p349. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)