

Evangelical Confessional Booths and Ascetic Accountability *Why Many Christian Accountability Groups Don't Work*

Put ten bucks in the jar. When I recall some of the popular discipleship disciplines I espoused and practiced in college, I shudder. Did I really think that they were biblical or even helpful? If one of the guys I was discipling caved into a particular sin he was “being held accountable” for, he had to put ten bucks in the jar. 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.

Maybe you've had a similar experience, one which frequently occurs within the context of what evangelicals call “Accountability Groups”- 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 through enforcing biblical standards while also providing an environment of grace in which we experience 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. Whether you can relate the experience above or not, one thing we all have in common is the struggle against mixed motives and deficient discipleship in our pursuit of holiness.

Asceticism and Confession

Although the aim of accountability groups is good, the practice is often misguided. Accountability groups often smack of asceticism. 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, these sorts of groups can devolve into a kind of evangelical 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 and 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 (ours and others). Confession becomes 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.” (Jn 5.16; cf. 1 Jn 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 accountable asceticism, the main motivation for not sinning is punishment or embarrassment. The idea is that we will 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 accountable asceticism, common to both is a subverting of the seriousness of sin and a forsaking of holiness, both of which sever us from the joy of Lord. In short, we substitute ritual for righteousness.

So what's the big deal? What's at stake in our distorted forms of accountability, in hollowed pursuits of holiness? Well, for starters, our relationship with the Trinity gets short-circuited. The Father isn't trusted, the Son's sacrifice is sold out, and the Spirit is slighted. 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).

In order to avoid the confessional booth mentality and ascetic accountability, two things are necessary. First, we have to take the **warnings** of Scripture 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, we need to be reminded of the powerful and precious **promises** of God (2 Pt 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)." 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. But how can we pursue this holiness in accountable relationships? What might such a pursuit look like within a group of like-minded brothers?

An Alternative

Because many Accountability Groups tend to drift towards legalism or moralism, a biblical alternative is needed to set a soul-satisfying, God-honoring course for holiness. Over the years, with varying yet steadily increasing measures of satisfaction and success, I have intentionally pursued holiness with like-minded brothers. Typically, we gather together once a week (though the scheduling conflicts of life often limit it to once every two weeks) to spur one another on to the happiness that comes with holiness. Over the past couple of years, our meetings have been especially edifying. This has been due, in part, to our attempts to avoid the two extremes described above and by practicing an alternative, more biblical approach to holiness.

Since many of us either eschew or exalt models, my aim is *not* to propose *another model*. Instead, I want to 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

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).

forgiveness and of holiness. Having briefly stated our Christ-centered presupposition, we now turn the principles of Christ-exalting accountability.

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* (a 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 In this quote Owen sets the mortification of sin in its rightful place, as a means to glorifying God and making much of the gospel of Christ. If this is not *our* aim, these principles will be easily perverted into rules for self-righteousness.

Owen anchors his reflections on mortification in an exposition of 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 Rom 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 want to suggest three principles that will foster God-honoring, gospel-adorning accountability groups.

Three Principles for Accountability Groups

I. 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? Perhaps sexual lust creeps in on late, lonely nights watching TV? Share these patterns of temptation with your friends and confess your sin to God and ask for forgiveness. Consider reading through any of Paul's vice lists, e.g. Gal 5.19-21, requesting 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.

II. 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. But what does it mean to "contend in the Spirit"? How are we to accomplish this? This leads us to the third principle.

III. Sanctification: *Set thy faith on His promises*.⁶ Although both identification and mortification are both technically a part of sanctification, what I have in view here is the faith of sanctification.

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

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

⁴ John Owen, *On Temptation*, in *Temptation and Sin*, 131-32.

⁵ Owen, *Mortification*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 79, 125-6.

What role does our faith play in our pursuit of holiness? As Owen avers, 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 doctrinal repository. Other times we pilfer His promises for an experiential buzz, but rarely do we believe and bank on his covenant promises. 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

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 in identifying and mortifying personal sin and spurring one another towards sanctifying trust in the promises of God. Practically, we aim to diligently identify sinful patterns in our lives and share them with one another. Furthermore, we pray for one another about these weaknesses and ask one another each week if we are struggling well. Sometimes we even suggest promises to one another that are related to a particular battle. In all of this we strive to be governed and guided by grace. A common goal is to maintain earnestness in our pursuit of personal holiness, which is fostered by a shared commitment to the mortification of sin.

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 Mt 5.8: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." When temptation came, I considered and trusted this promise— that those who are pure in 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 ascetic accountability and the evangelical confessional booth and so adorn the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. No need for ten bucks in the jar.