

About Accountability

I have been thinking about accountability. I am drawn to this idea primarily because of my own vulnerability. As I grow in my relationship with Jesus, I am more aware that I really don't want to mess up and that I need trusted friends, distant friends and people who love me (but who are not impressed *by* me) to help me through life. Over the past few years I have tried to pay close attention to those situations that ultimately can destroy a persons life. Where did this destruction come from? Did it come from outside of themselves or from within? Are the very things that can destroy what God has built over the years lurking inside of us? Or are they forces from the outside seeking to annihilate us? The answer is yes. And we must be wise not only about our own inability to completely hold it together by ourselves but also about the forces of evil around us who seek to 'kill, steal and destroy'.

Accountability is only a means to the end. But what is the end? What is the goal of accountability? The short answer is that we choose to be accountable because it is the right thing to do: we want our lives to be guided by integrity (Proverbs 11:3). We do this as an act of worship, for the glory of God! But there is a myth of accountability, for I am only as accountable as I choose to be.

FINISHING WELL

ON THE HUMAN BEING side of the equation, I suggest that there are at least five different levels of accountability that each of us must 'buy-into' if we are going to finish well. This is not an exhaustive list. Indeed, there are other elements that are necessary from time to time (such as seeing a professional counselor, consulting with an attorney or listening to your mother) but these five elements make sense to me. Here they are:

1. **Top Down** – I think most people think about this. We need someone in our lives who loves us enough to nurture us with care, concern and knows us enough to ask the right questions at the right time. This person is more like a mentor. Indeed, they function pastorally in our lives in a way that both spurs us on and restrains our tendency towards sinful thinking and behavior. It should not be unusual for us to have several people like this in our lives. They serve as a guide to us by their life example. They empower us by their presence and spur us on to fear God– to hate what God hates and love what God loves. We may not see them frequently but they seek us out from time to time and let us know they care about us, are watching over our lives, and that we are important to them. We know they are available to us when we need them. And we reciprocate with vulnerability, honesty and the gratitude of friendship.
2. **Bottom Up** – Perhaps more than we need to be accountable to someone, we need to function in a relationship where someone is accountable to us. Do you have someone in your life that looks to you as an example and seeks you out for wisdom and guidance from time to time? If not, pray and God will show you

someone that you can provide this form of shepherding to. They need it and you need it. This form of accountability is understood more from the bottom up, where someone is looking to us, watching us, modeling some of their life from some of our life and because of this respect and scrutiny, they hold us accountable. It is not so much the questions they ask us as it is the answers they demand from us. They are watching us, and their ‘stare’ forces us to develop holy habits which enable us to grow not only in right behavior but also in right thinking. My understanding of this concept came from raising a son. I realized over many years that his observations of me became a force for good in my life. This desire God has put in us to not disappoint them or let them down, this desire to be a good role model empowers us toward our best self. This too is a form of accountability.

3. **Horizontal** – We each need a small group of people in our lives that are peers, who will be our friend and who are willing to speak the truth to us in love. These are people who are not impressed by us and are comfortable enough affirming, encouraging, admonishing and even rebuking us when necessary. These friends are willing to speak truth in love and say the hard things we need to hear. They often see what we don’t see and they are loyal enough to tell us because they love us. These are people that we hold high levels of trust with, have enough contact with on a regular basis so that they know what is going on with us and who are never swayed by our ‘stardom’ in whatever form it takes. They function as true friends because they are willing to do the hard work of risking our unhappy reactions to their truth telling. They fulfill the phrase “bear one-another’s burdens and fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). We must learn how to respond to them in ways that sincerely communicates we value the relationship. We must learn how to receive the wisdom and correction God wants to give us through them. We must cultivate and maintain a teachable spirit.
4. **Marital** – For those who are married or are in a committed relationship, we receive some accountability through our spouse. This is the person in our life who knows our patterns, is able to read our emotions and will be able to sense if something is wrong. They know our “going out and our coming in” and are able to detect things in us each day that we often cannot detect in ourselves. They see things we cannot hide. They love us enough to ask us the right questions at the right time in the right way. Our job is to choose humility and remain teachable. They also have the special way of asking us things in ways, and at times, that we don’t want them to ask. Because they love us, they want us to finish well and want to flourish together with us, God has given them to us as a gift to help us grow.
5. **Structural** – Many of us have a more formal group that we must remain accountable to over time. In my case, it is a Board. These folks love me and support me but also love and have a responsibility to the institution that I am leading. They must balance what is in my best interest and what is in the best interest of the institution. Because of the role they have in my life, they will not

‘catch things’ immediately. Indeed, it could be months or longer until they see and then issue consequences. But this kind of oversight, this kind of accountability is necessary and healthy.

The purpose of this article was not to address comprehensively all the different categories of accountability. If I were to do that, I would speak about people who help us with finances, or peer review institutions that speak to our use of power. I would talk about groups that license an organization or individuals who supervise us as part of their job. Instead, I have chosen to speak primarily about those areas that we must be intentional with in regards to accountability, areas where, if we truly want to grow, we must take the initiative. But accountability is a myth if we think it is an end. Because we are only as accountable as we want to be, we can escape almost every level while at the same time playing the game in our mind and convincing ourselves that we are not in any danger because we have these people and structures in our lives that somehow guarantee that we will not mess up.

“Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”
Proverbs 16:18

“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”
Jeremiah 17:9

“Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.”
II Corinthians 10:12

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