

## The Accountability of Community

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Kids are dismissed for Children's Church, and while that noise goes away, please take out your cell phones and turn them off. Not just on silent, but off, please.

Let's pray: Lord, help us to hear from you today, as your Holy Spirit speaks to us. God, we open ourselves to your work right now. Overcome our fear, soothe our anxiety, and transform our minds that we might focus on what you have for us this day. Grant that we would be willing to be fools for you and in front of those to whom you have given us in the body. In the Name of the One who gave His all for us. Amen.

### Activity: 15 minutes

You gotta love when someone opens a sermon that way. ☺ Are you ready? We're going to start with an activity, but it's a pretty easy one. I'm going to give you a chance to talk about other people for a few minutes. When I say go, please get in groups of about 4-6 people. The condition is: you can't be with only people you know. At least half of your group has to be people you don't know well, and at least one person has to be someone you don't know at all. (If you know every single person in this building today, you are excused from that requirement.)

When you are in your group, you can start. You have a piece of **purple** paper in your bulletin, which is normally your sermon outline. You'll notice it's not your sermon outline. Instead, it's the opening activity. Your job as a small group is to answer this question: if someone walked in here today and did not know Jesus, had never heard of Jesus, and lived a life that was completely opposite of what Jesus wants ... what would that look like? Make a list, in your small group, of the attitudes that person would possess and actions that person would display. A prize to the group that comes up with the longest list. Any questions?

You have about seven minutes total, so the faster you form your group, the better! **GO**

Now, let's start making our list. Anyone have 20 things? Name them, and we'll see if our PowerPoint experts can find a way to fit them all on the screen. *After:* Let's give that group a hand ... and here are your prizes! Now, any groups have things other than that? Call them out.

Wow, that's quite a list. That is one messed-up dude, isn't it? Now, here's the next question for your small group: let's say that person becomes a Christian today, finds Jesus, is born again, all dat. In your group, decide which of those things will change immediately, and which will change in, let's say the first three months of following Jesus. **GO**

Okay, let's hear from a few groups ... what changes immediately? In three months?

Thanks much for your participation; give yourselves a hand. ☺ For the next few minutes I'm going to break this down a little bit, bringing this back to the *love* passage we heard. Interestingly, in the course of my Christian life I've read through the Bible in all sorts of

ways: OT and NT, chronological, using a one-year plan like Kelly does. Looking for something different, recently I decided to read through it alphabetically. So I tackled Acts, then Amos, then 1 and 2 Chronicles, then Colossians, and have finished 1 Corinthians and now started 2 Corinthians. So the message today is built on the C books of Scripture. It's amazing to me how such unrelated books are so intimately connected – God is so good.

I really only have three things to say today. It's the Classic Three-Point Sermon:

The first thing is obvious: We must all change when we become Christians. I mean, isn't that obvious: you can't become a Christian and stay the same. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that in Christ, the old has gone and the new has come. And while spiritually we are **completely** different – Romans 6 makes that clear, too -- it's also true that in our daily lives **something** specific has to change. But what?

So: when I became a Christian, how many of those things up there do you think I had a problem with? Right – about 100! The first thing God worked on in me was my mouth. I started following Jesus at age 18, and by then I had developed quite a nasty mouth. That included sarcasm, cutting jokes, and a lot of swearing. For whatever reason, God made it clear to me that the swearing had to go, right away. The first six months, I swore twice, and I haven't said a swear word since.

When you first started following Jesus, it may have been something else. Kelly has talked about how God set him free from drug and alcohol addiction immediately. For some of you, it might have been reconciliation in a relationship, or a reminder of something you should or shouldn't have been doing all along. But God didn't show me all 100 things that needed to change immediately. Why? Because it would have been overwhelming. I would have likely given up before I started. I would have been like Isaiah who, upon seeing the Lord high and lifted up, said "Woe is me! I am undone!"

You may remember there is a parable, a story that Jesus tells. This one is about a slave who owed his king millions of dollars, and when the king demanded payment, the slave begged for time to repay (which he could never do). Finally the king relented; he didn't just give the slave more time, he **completely forgave** the debt. The slave was so overjoyed, he walked out of the palace ... saw someone who owed him a few bucks, and demanded payment. The other slave begged for time to repay (just as he had done), and the first slave refused and had him thrown into prison.

That's what I was like. I had become a Christian, God showed me something to work on ... *and I figured that everyone else should be working on that, too.* And when other people who called themselves Christians swore, I thought less of them as Christians. Though God had extended me grace in the other 99 areas, I didn't extend it to others in this one.

That's the second bullet point here: We must give grace to each other as God is changing us. If you have 100 things that God wants to change, and I do, and Kafiya Majekobaje Beckley does, and Maisha Cole does ... what are the odds that the thing God wants to work on first in all of us is going to be the same? Probably pretty slim. And because God is a gracious God, He isn't going to show us all of our flaws at once.

Part of accountability, then, is grace. It is certainly true that I must be accountable to God for what He has asked me to change, and so must you. But those paths don't necessarily cross. It's not my job to hold you accountable for what God is teaching **me**.

2 Chronicles repeatedly sums up a man's – a king's! – life in one sentence. Solomon gets the first nine chapters ... then in the next 27 chapters you have 20 kings. And there is a pattern to how their stories are told. Just listen to this sequence of kings:

- 2 Chron 27: Jotham (9 verses) was 25 years old when he began to reign; he reigned 16 years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jerushah daughter of Zadok. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord just as his father Uzziah had done
- 2 Chron 28: Ahaz (27 verses, and his reign included a huge war) was 20 years old when he began to reign; he reigned 16 years in Jerusalem. He did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord, as his ancestor David had done, but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel
- 2 Chron 29: Hezekiah (4 chapters and he cleansed the neglected temple, reinstated the Passover, destroyed the temples of idols, fought off a great ruler of the ancient world, and when he was going to die prayed to God and was given 15 more years!) began to reign when he was 25 years old; he reigned 29 years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abijah daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, just as his ancestor David had done
- 2 Chron 33: Manasseh (20 verses) was 12 years old when he began to reign; he reigned 55 years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel
- 2 Chron 33: Amon (5 verses) was 22 years old when he began to reign; he reigned 2 years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord

Amon was so bad his servants conspired to kill him in the palace so they could put his **8-year-old son** on the throne! That's you guys getting so tired of my preaching that you bump me off and put Zephaniah up here instead! But these chapters talk to us about our lives: they are really summed up in one sentence. I've often been in a group setting and played the "what is your tombstone going to say?" game. People talk about husband/wife, father/mother, worker, and all sorts of other things. But Chronicles seems to make it clear that our lives will be summed up in one sentence: we did well or we did evil in the sight of the Lord. And being accountable to what God has asked us to do is the same thing as doing what is right in the eyes of the Lord. He doesn't call us all to be pastors, or missionaries to foreign countries; but He does call us all to listen and obey.

And *keep* listening and obeying. God is a gracious God and will not require you to change 100 things the day you become a Christian ... but He will expect you to cooperate as He changes the first one, and then the next, and the next, and so on.

In the same way, we need to give grace to each other. It is not enough for me to simply recognize a flaw, a sin, in you; and it is not enough for me to approach you – all of you – and tell you about your sin – all your sins – and expect you to change them all at once. Wouldn't I be a popular guy if I did that? I have a responsibility to give you enough grace to assume that you are listening to God and changing the way He wants you to change. And I have a responsibility to get to know you so that I can ask what God is teaching you – and *then* hold

you accountable for *that*. Not just overcoming your sins, but changing the way God is asking you to be changed.

I thought of this at our Leadership Ministry Team meeting this week. I was paired up with Jill Mesa and Kathryn Jackson, and as they shared about their ministries, I was convicted. God has given me gifts, and he has showed me how I am to use them: to help the leaders in the church be more effective in fulfilling what God has laid on their hearts. And I realized that to “help” people what I had done was tell them to call me any time and I’d be glad to meet with them. In the three years since I first offered that, you know how many have contacted me outside of those meetings? I can think of two (other than Rose; she has a bit of a cheating advantage since she lives with me). Whose fault is that? Mostly mine! If God has told me to do it, and I know something I can do to help, and it doesn’t get done, it’s not their fault.

Referring back to 2 Chronicles, accountability to others is a large part of how God designed us to do what is right in His eyes. In Genesis 4 we read about Cain and Abel. You may recall that the first family, the real first family, was even more messed up than your family is. Think about it: created pure and perfect, it didn’t take long before Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God had explicitly told them not to. When God confronts them – His attempt to hold them accountable – Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent. So God kicks them out of Eden. In the next chapter, Cain offers some second-rate fruit to God, who was not impressed. Cain gets angry and ... God confronts him: “Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” Cain instead lures Abel out to the field and kills him. Again God confronts – attempts at accountability all over this story! – but Cain tries to deflect God’s question about Abel by asking: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer, in Christ, is pretty clear: yes you are. God will attempt to hold you accountable and give you a chance to listen and to be changed.

Third sermon point: We must all give and receive accountability for changing

We must be clear when we say that growth is a process: if we are aware of things of which Jesus disapproves, it is not a *process* to get rid of it. It involves obedience, not patience. Our “process” and His “patience” come when we need to go from good to best, not from bad to good. That of course doesn’t mean that every sin, every less-than-the-best-attitude-and-action God reveals to you, you’ll be able to get rid of it, and almost certainly not immediately upon conversion. But you **are** required to do everything you can to get rid of it: prayer, fasting, active movement away from the sin and toward righteousness, and – yes – being accountable to the community.

The problem with our community is that the world does not see a **body** of Christ. Instead, the world sees a bunch of separate body parts, as though we were all Cousin Itt from the Addams Family. The same thing happened in the early church: read about the conflicts over offerings in Acts 5, the food pantry in Acts 6, over racism in Acts 10-11, circumcision in Acts 15, and so on. And just like the first family was more messed up than yours ever will be, so the church in Corinth was more messed up than our church ever will be.

Check out some of what Paul says to the church at Corinth – all related to being accountable to each other:

- 1 Cor 3:2-3: I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?
- 1 Cor 5:9-13: I wrote to you not to associate with sexually immoral persons – not at all meaning the immoral of this world, of the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge? God will judge those outside. “Drive out the wicked person from among you.”
- 1 Cor 6:9-11: Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. *But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*
- 1 Cor 6:12-13, 19-20: “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,” and God will destroy both one and the other ... Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.
- 1 Cor 8: Paul talks about food sacrificed to idols, but the principle runs much broader. He acknowledges that the idols are worthless, and therefore eating the food sacrificed to them really doesn’t mean anything ... except to those for whom it does. If you have come out of alcoholism, a single drink is a very different thing for you than it is for someone who has never had an issue with having one drink and then stopping. Paul’s advice is not to the alcoholic (he addressed that in chapters 5 and 6) but to the non-alcoholic: “Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol (having a drink), might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.” If alcohol is a stumbling block for you, I will never drink again; if gossip is, I will never talk with you about anyone else; if lust is, I will never suggest to you a movie or TV show that includes innuendo or risqué clothing. See, once you are a Christian, it’s not so much about your freedom as it is about not causing others to stumble.

This – this! – is the context for 1 Corinthians 13. Probably, if you’re like me, the main time you hear that passage is at weddings. But you know what? When Paul wrote it, that passage had **nothing** to do with romantic love. It was all about life in the body. So I’m not just held to the standard of being patient, kind, not irritable with my spouse; God is asking: are you

patient with Dean Lundborg? Are you kind to Eugene Wood? Do you avoid envying Jessica Cohoe? Do you not get irritated with Patti Oliver? Do you bear all things with Heather Carroll? Do you believe all things with Kathryn Jackson? Do you endure all things with Bud Grebe? That's love ... and that's accountability.

As a Christian, I must change – and be changed by God – continually, in whatever way God asks. And I must offer you grace – and receive grace from you – to change in the way God is speaking to you and not expect you to change the same way I am. And I must hold you accountable for those things, and invite you to hold me accountable for those things.

If you want to talk about community, it's not all about fellowship in the sense of potluck meals or playing games together and stuff like that. It's also about being open with one another that the Spirit of God can pass between us without all the barriers we usually put up. Your purple paper asks you to jot down one area where you need to be held accountable, need to hold someone else accountable, and one way this week you can move toward that: a phone call, an e-mail, a cup of coffee to discuss.

If the worship team could come back up, please. As we sing our three response songs, I invite you to make each one an expression of The Accountability of Community. Not only the songs themselves, but also the activities occurring during those times:

1. during the first song we will take up the offering; we are all, as followers of Christ, accountable to give generously to God and His work here
2. during the second song, we will take communion. Please wait for Bud and Julie Grebe to serve those who can't easily come forward (including those in the Family Worship Room), and use that time and the song to reflect on how Jesus gave Himself up for us, and how much we need to give ourselves up for each other
3. during the third song, I'm going to ask Pastor Tonie, Pastor Rose, Anthony, Suzanne and Matthew to be up front to pray with you. If you need to confess your need to be held accountable, or the ways you have not held other accountable, or the way you haven't listened to God to even know how He wants you to change, please come forward at that time.