

***Discipleship 101: The Report Card***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Romans 14:1-13,19; Hebrews 3:12-15; Galatians 5:24-6:2***

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Galatians 5:24-6:2. Listen now to God's Word. "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

It's one of the most dreaded times in the entire school year...the first report cards are coming home. For those who have great grades, it's a symbol of accomplishment. For those who've not done that well, there's a massive fear of disappointment. You can go online and find kids asking the question on Yahoo, "What's the best way to hide my report card?" In fact, I found a crazy story out of Alabama from 2009. An 11-year-old in Huntsville went so far as to fake his own kidnapping. He claimed that he had been forced into a car at gunpoint and managed to escape. He ran to his grandparents' house, safe but without his backpack and report card. Police were suspicious, though, when it turned out the boy had been able to escape with his band instrument. The boy soon caved and his grandfather called the police to apologize.

Do we ever lose that fear of the report card? As we get older, we get different report cards – evaluations, we call them – and those affect how much we make and promotions we get. Just thinking about it puts us on edge. It's also a reason that some folks are drawn to Christianity and others flee it. Scripture tells us that God will eventually bring everything we've done to account. Some of us love that Jesus Christ has paid the penalty for our sins; because we believe in Him and follow Him, we aren't condemned but forgiven. Others run because they don't like the thought of a God who will judge, even if He does so in perfect love and mercy.

The Christian church has sometimes neglected accountability because, just like those report cards, we get nervous about it. We fear that if we're accountable to someone else, we'll disappoint somebody or our worst secrets will become public knowledge. When I plan worship services, I look for music that fits the week's theme in some way. Sometimes the songs I find don't fit our church or are too hard to put together in a couple weeks' time. But when I searched my usual sources for songs with the theme of accountability, even a mention of it, I found nothing. Nada. Not a single song. That surprised me, since one of the main ways the church has taught the faith is through music. But apparently, we've missed the boat on accountability.

That's unfortunate, because Scripture calls us to be living report cards to one another in the church. We are called to be accountable to one another. And accountability isn't supposed to be scary or depressing. It's supposed to encourage us, to help us mature in our faith, and to draw us into closer relationships with God and one another. Today, we're going to see what Scripture says about accountability and how we can find joy in accountability with one another.

I want to start by explaining Christian accountability. The world doesn't understand accountability, and often, neither does the church. It's the practice of urging one another to practice God's ways. The clearest we see this in the Old Testament is in Ezekiel 33, where God says to Ezekiel, "I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself." From this passage, we learn that we as believers have a responsibility to one another, to watch out for one another, to warn one another and guard one another against sin.

The New Testament believers met regularly together...even daily. They sang, prayed, fellowshiped, preached, taught, even prophesied. They also held one another to account. They came together at various times to check in with each other, to restore those who fell in some way through their actions. The early church members didn't confess to a priest or pastor; most churches didn't have a central leader. Instead, it was done in community. In the modern church, accountability is usually about two to four people meeting regularly to talk about life and faith and what's affecting them. We can practice it in other ways, but this is the most typical.

In my life, I've been in a few accountability groups that have been really helpful. They built friendships, but they also forced me to think about my walk with Christ. At an accountability meeting, I might be asked by a fellow Christian, "What are you doing to keep your thoughts focused on God? What actions are you taking to serve others as Christ served you? What is there in your life right now that you think displeases God?" It helps us to bring focus to our lives and our faith. When we ask these questions of one another, it's not one-sided; it's a group effort, designed to help everybody involved to be thoughtful about our faith.

So we've got a definition of what accountability is and the basics of practicing it. Let's dive deeper into the Scripture to see what accountability exists to do and what it avoids. First, let's go back this morning's first passage. Out of context, it might sound a little funny. But in the early church, there were some significant issues to tackle. One had to do with meat. When you and I buy meat, we go to Meijer and pick up whatever we need. But in Paul's day, meat bought in the marketplace was first sacrificed to idols. That didn't matter to some believers; they knew that YHWH alone was God. They didn't worship any other gods, they didn't participate in the sacrifice, and they ate with a clean conscience. But other believers had a crisis about it. Maybe before they became Christians, they themselves made sacrifices to those idols. They couldn't eat meat without feeling they were betraying their faith. These two sides got into an argument with one another; the meat-eaters called the vegetarians weak in faith, and the vegetarians said the meat-eaters were idol worshippers. The fight was getting serious.

Paul said this wasn't about immorality but disputable issues of conscience. He says the same thing about those who observe holy days and those who don't. He writes "don't judge your brother or sister in the LORD or look down on them." We are ultimately responsible to God; He knows our hearts. We are His servants and He is our judge. Paul says, "let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification... make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way."

That leads us to the first truth we discover about accountability today: *accountability is not about judging each other, but helping each other avoid sin.* The reason we don't share our weaknesses and fears and sins with other people is because we think they'll judge us or hate us or despise us. Paul says that instead, we should be full of compassion. We too are sinners, every last one of us; for us to condemn someone else is to ignore that we, too, are saved by God's grace alone through Jesus Christ and not through any merit on our part. Our role is not to reject others, but to remove any human obstacles from their path to Christ.

There are a couple of ways this applies to us as we help one another along in our relationships with Christ. First, when the Bible is silent or gives no absolute principle, we shouldn't declare something sinful if God has not done so. While it's better than it once was, we still do it in Christian circles from time to time. I went to a great Christian university that prohibited dancing. My seminary required students to pledge not to drink alcohol during their time there. Now promiscuity and alcoholism have hurt many people throughout history, but again, we see Jesus and His disciples celebrating and drinking in moderation. I know some of you have been hurt in the past by people making judgments about disputable matters; we need to make sure that isn't a part of our accountability. In the accountability questions I put into the bulletins today, you'll see that they aren't "yes/no" questions. They are designed to start conversation. Accountability isn't about reinstating the law; it's about showing each other grace.

It also means that we must genuinely ask someone to account for their actions when they have genuinely sinned. God through the prophet Ezekiel said *we* will be held accountable if someone in our faith community sins and we do not warn that person and speak out when we become aware of it. If someone is not holding fast to the truth of Scripture and faith in Jesus Christ, we have a sacred obligation to correct them. Yet stating that what they are doing is sinful and calling on them to repent is very different from judging them.

The word "judge" in Greek, *krino*, always has the sense of the personal – a personal decision, a personal opinion, a personal condemnation. In that biblical sense, only God has the wisdom to make that kind of personal judgment fairly. If we judge a person, it means we have made a decision about a person's future based on their past. And yet we know that God is in the business of reforming us, reshaping us, and remaking us into the image and likeness of His Son Jesus. God is in the business of making wonderful futures out of awful, sinful pasts. That means that when we call someone to account for their actions, it's not to condemn, but to be an instrument of God speaking into their lives, calling them to repentance and wholeness and freedom from sin through Christ. So when we begin to be accountable to others, it's to be in a spirit of love and grace and mercy, not judgment.

The second passage this morning teaches us another truth about accountability. Hebrews 3 starts by telling us what we just discussed – we are to "see to it that none of us has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." But the next phrase says that the way that we can avoid being hardened by sin is to "encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today." And that's our second truth about accountability: *we do it to encourage one another.*

There's no doubt in my mind that encouragement is one of the strongest tools we can use to hone one another into more faithful disciples. Perhaps it's because encouragement is something we so rarely hear. We're regularly discouraged – discouraged about our pension or 401K, discouraged about our work, discouraged when friends move away and our basements leak and our church loses members. There's rarely a word of support. Sometimes when we come to church, we need encouragement, and instead it sounds like God's unhappy with us.

But Scripture tells us that in the midst of our troubles, not only are we to be encouraged, but we can encourage others. In John 16:33, Jesus tells us, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." In fact, Jesus uses the phrase six different times in the gospels – "Take heart! Be encouraged!" Remember the Corinthian church with all its issues with sin Paul had to sort out? He still encouraged them. In 2 Corinthians 7:4, Paul writes, "I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds." Paul wrote about the Colossians, saying, "My purpose [in prayer for them] is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

When we work together as friends in accountability, we have the chance to be encouragers and to be encouraged. Accountability is about rooting out sin, but it's also about rejoicing in the fact that God is at work! In every believer, God is moving. The Holy Spirit lives within us in a unique and mysterious way, guiding us ever closer to Himself. When I see someone in our congregation have the spiritual grace to make a difficult decision, to forgive a betrayal, to move from sin into righteousness, to give sacrificially of themselves so others in need might have enough – that encourages me as a pastor. It should encourage you too.

When we take the task of accountability seriously, when we take the time to meet regularly with a friend or two to talk about where God is moving and leading and directing, we can be encouraged to see our own growth and growth in those close to us. I encourage you to start the spiritual discipline of accountability not only to receive genuine, honest feedback on your walk with Christ, but so that you might be encouraged by the struggles and successes of those around you. We can truly lift one another up through accountability.

That leads to our final passage and my final point. In Galatians, Paul encourages us that since "we have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires, since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." He speaks about restoring those who sin gently while guarding ourselves against temptation. He concludes by saying that we fulfill the law of Christ, we are following in Jesus' footsteps, when we "carry each other's burdens."

And that's the third lesson of accountability: *as servants of the living God, we have the privilege of carrying burdens for one another.* In Matthew 11, Jesus calls all the weary and heavy-laden to come to Him, to take His load upon them, to learn from Him, because His burden is light. He trades loads with us. He took our sins with Him to the cross and left them there; they are paid for and forgiven. Even though the road of discipleship is sometimes difficult and painful, it is nothing in comparison to living a lifetime filled with sin and guilt and regret. God has taken the burden of sin and shame away; we can live life free to rejoice in God's goodness!

In the same way, we are called to bear one another's burdens. We can't take someone's sins away; only Christ can do that. But we can come alongside and support one another when things get rough. We can help make the load easier to carry. It's when we see each other through difficult times that God binds us together and roots us firmly in Himself and in His people that are the church.

Our first job is to pray for one another. You may not know this, but I have a list with every family in our church on it, divided up over the days of the week I'm in the office. You are prayed for, by name, every week. I attempt to pray more often when I know of a specific burden. That's part of lifting one another up to God. Because no matter what burdens we might heft onto our shoulders, it's only going to make a difference if we take it before the LORD first. Then what we do can have real and eternal impact.

But if we leave it at prayer, we haven't fulfilled everything we are called to do. Carrying each others' burdens is a literal command as well as a spiritual one. If your friend is depressed or struggling with a temptation, how might you alleviate it, by calling them on the phone or keeping them active? If there are physical needs that entail a cost, how might you help, through your funds or through your contacts? We like to think we all have it together, but we don't. We are here to support one another through the rough stuff. We don't have the means personally to help with every problem, but that doesn't mean that we can't work with others in the church to make each individual's own burdens a little lighter.

I recently heard an example of this that I thought was pretty stunning and got me to thinking about my own commitments. R. C. Sproul Jr. is the son of the well-known Presbyterian author and speaker, and he pastors a small church in Centerville, TN. In a series I listened to recently, he talked about how a young mother in his church with three children was abandoned by her husband. The elders of the church went to another church family who lived a block away and said, "This family needs your help. As faithful believers living nearby, you should be carrying for this family like you do your own." They regularly share meals together. When the plumbing breaks or the appliances don't work, the husband's on call. They share in the responsibilities surrounding the children. What a blessing! What would it be for us if we would take an interest in others like that? Might we not grow exponentially in our faith? Might we others see what the love of God is doing in our midst? When we share our burdens, the love of Jesus becomes apparent to all who are touched by that sharing and sacrifice.

Friends, let's be accountable to God and to one another. Call a friend or two up and commit to each other that you will meet together for this purpose. If you need help in figuring out what questions to ask or what to do, call me and we'll work together through it. I'd come to a first meeting or two to help you get started. I have some sample questions that might get you started in your bulletin. I believe Scripture is telling us that we will be blessed when we hold each other up, encouraging each other, watching out for each other, keeping an eye out for sin and gently restoring one another when we fall. Let's be that living report card to one another so that we might all graduate from the school of Jesus with the diploma of eternal life.