

<https://blog.faithlife.com/blog/2014/12/7-mistakes-that-make-your-accountability-group-shallow/>

7 Mistakes That Make Your Accountability Group Shallow

Today's guest post is by Luke Gilkerson, the educational resource manager at Covenant Eyes. Luke is the author of multiple books on biblical sexuality and he blogs at CovenantEyes.com.



He came to me a few days ago and told me his nagging secret. From a young age, he had been hooked on Internet porn. The shame and guilt were constant burdens for him. He had tried everything to stop—everything, of course, except getting real help from real people.

Along with other recommendations, I urged him to find some regular accountability right away, and the look on his face told me he wasn't thrilled by my advice. "Accountability? I've been in groups like that before, and the whole thing seemed pointless. Nothing really changed."

As someone who has worked at Covenant Eyes for years, I hear these kinds of comments all the time. If accountability is such a good idea, why does it sometimes produce such terrible results?

Mistake #1: Infrequent, irregular communication

The author of Hebrews tells us to encourage and exhort each other every day, as long as it is called “today” (Hebrews 3:13). But for many people accountability is something that happens sporadically.

Many practice emergency accountability: they only initiate conversations when something serious has happened. Have you ever been to an ER? It isn’t a pleasant place. Yes, the doctors there can help you—they might even save your life. But they are more concerned about restarting your heart, not figuring out a new diet plan that reduces inflammation in the body.

The Bible sees accountability as good preventative medicine, not a spiritual emergency room.

Mistake #2: Treating accountability as a last resort, not a lifestyle

All Christians should have at least a few things in common, one of them being the belief that we are sinful and in need of a great Savior. It is amazing, given this basic belief, that we spend so much time trying to convince one another about how good we are.

For some, accountability is for those people who are really far gone—the real perverts, sick-o’s, and addicts who actually need someone else’s help. But the Bible says to all Christians, “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

Being accountable to someone else is not God’s second-best. Accountability is one of God’s ordinary and regular means of grace to help us become more Godward.

Mistake #3: Focusing only on confession, not change

Some of us love accountability because it is a chance to unburden our guilty conscience. This is, of course, a huge benefit. We experience a sort of natural relief when we stop holding in our secrets, when we have a shoulder to cry on, when we hear those affirming words, “Me too.”

But this is not the end goal of accountability. Accountability is not a one-way street of confession but a two-way street of confession and grace. When we give an account of our sins to another, we need to receive an account of God’s grace in return.

Receiving grace means (1) hearing someone else affirm that God has forgiven our sins and cleansed us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9), and (2) hearing someone else share how God’s grace trains us to renounce our sin and walk in godliness (Titus 2:11-14).

Good accountability partners know that God’s grace frees us from both the guilt of sin and the grip of sin. Grace renews our hearts, giving us confidence in our forgiveness and promising the great reward of nearness to God.

Mistake #4: Focusing only on sins of commission, not omission

Sins like lust, greed, worry, envy, and pride are relatively easy to spot. But sins of omission are much harder to see: sins like joylessness, prayerlessness, ingratitude, unbelief, a lack of fascination with the gospel, a lack of service to others, a lack of intentionality about how we use our time and money, and a lack of satisfaction in God.

In his famous *On the Mortification of Sin*, John Owen writes that we need to hate sin as sin—because it is offensive to God—not just because it is irksome to us. Often we target only specific sins because they are troubling our own lives, but this fails to remember that Jesus bled and died for every kind of sin.

Good accountability partners help us to recognize the sins we can't see or the sins we don't want to see. They help us to remember the goal of accountability is not just remedying a bad habit but transforming our whole lives.

Mistake #5: Focusing only on our behaviors, not our beliefs

At the very least, accountability is about giving someone else an account of the temptations we encounter and the sins we commit. But if we stop there, we fall short of the real change accountability can bring.

Hebrews 3:13 tells us to frequently exhort one another so that we won't be "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." This tells us that there is a level of interaction we are meant to have with one another that actually helps us to see how sin is operating at the heart level, not just on the surface.

Good accountability doesn't stop at mere behaviors but probes deeper to motivations. Yes, conversations will probably always start on the surface, but it must move down to the core of who we are—to the idols of our hearts.

Instead of merely asking someone if they watched porn or lusted after anyone, ask them why their fantasies are so enticing. Do they enjoy the sense of entitlement? The illusion of intimacy? The feeling of safety and refuge?

Instead of merely asking someone if they lost their temper, ask them what they desire so much that they get angry when they can't have it. Respect? Time to themselves? The last word? Peace?

Instead of merely asking someone if they have grumbled and complained, ask them if they are trusting in their specific circumstances to make them happy or trusting in God for their joy.

Mistake #6: Focusing only on our habits, not our hopes

The great danger of accountability is that we might focus only on how we fall short, not on the great hope we have for change.

As Christians, because the Spirit of Christ is in us, we have a profoundly new identity. When Christ rose from the dead, he died to this realm of sin. Therefore, though we still live in sin's presence, we are dead

to sin's power (Romans 6:6). We belong to the sinless kingdom of God, and Christ's resurrection power flows in our veins.

Our first application, therefore, is not to try harder to overcome sin but to recognize that we are already dead to it. "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). Only then will we be able to not let sin reign in us (v.12).

The word translated "consider" is an accounting term: it means to add something up, to take stock of something. When a child adds up how much money is in her piggy bank, at the end of the counting she doesn't have any more or less in the bank than when she began. The only thing that has changed is her knowledge about the value of what is there. This is what Paul means. You already believe these basic gospel truths—Christ died to sin's power, He rose from the dead, and the Spirit of the risen Christ lives within you—so now consider it to be true; reckon it; meditate on it; get the idea of your new identity deep into your soul.

This is where biblical accountability is most powerful: not when someone is merely calling you out on your sin but when someone is calling you up to the person you already are in Christ. What if these were the kind of friends we had? Realists who know that sin is a present force, and yet also idealists who believe that holiness is our destiny.

Mistake #7: Focusing only on our obedience, not Christ's

Confession can easily become a pedestal where we prop up the idol of our own performance. We begin to judge the quality of our spiritual lives in comparison to the performance of other people. We base our spiritual growth on a few benchmarks of success. We can even begin to use the habit of accountability as a pretense or smokescreen to hide the things we don't want to talk about.

But we need not be afraid of honesty when we focus less on our performance and focus more on Christ's performance on our behalf. Accountability partners should not merely hold you accountable to the sins you commit but whether you are placing your trust wholeheartedly in the work of Christ to save you. Good accountability friendships should be relationships where the gospel is explored and celebrated, because where sin increases, grace increases all the more.