

WE NEED ACCESSIBILITY MORE THAN ACCOUNTABILITY

In the battle against lust and porn, most Christian approaches stress the importance of accountability. In my experience, however, what we need more than accountability is *accessibility*. During my sexual struggles, I was held accountable by friends and mentors who were among the most insightful and highly trained men around. But I didn't have the ability or desire to let these men into my heart. Below is an excerpt from my July 1994 journal.

The most surprising, confounding, and tragic aspect of my actions is that long before I deceived anyone else, I deceived myself. For at least two years in our marriage, a growing, cancerous growth of falsehood attached itself to me. I've said all along, "That's not a deadly tumor, it's just a blemish." As each sexual boundary has been crossed, I've minimized, rationalized, excused, or done penance. I've closed myself off to friends, telling them a fraction of what was really happening. I've closed myself off to God, trying harder to do the things I thought would please him. I'm an arrogant, stubborn-hearted, self-sufficient man. Lord, I believe you resist the proud and give grace to the humble. Humble me. I need your grace and truth like never before.

When my friend Jeffrey's multiple adulterous affairs were exposed, I asked him how I might help. He told me that what he really needed most was an accountability relationship. Something inside me sank. *Really?* Your marriage is dangling by a thread, and you want *accountability*? When I asked him what he had in mind,

he told me he was hoping for someone who would check in with him regarding his "purity level." A colleague had given him a list of accountability questions. Would I meet with him every week to review them?

Jeffrey desperately needed accountability. The tragedy is that, like many men today, his understanding of accountability was dreadfully inadequate. Accountability is usually approached in three ways—two common, and one less common. I call the first common approach *cop accountability*. Our chosen accountability partner represents law enforcement, and we are the law-abiding citizen with a proclivity for exceeding the posted limits of appropriate sexual behavior. When we exceed the lawful limits, we turn ourselves in to a law enforcement officer, who issues the appropriate citation. I wish I could say that my description here is written entirely in jest, but I would be lying. With the cop accountability strategy, I believe that by sharing my sin with someone, I will have greater incentive to choose what is right. It's about the avoidance of shame. This form of accountability is a gospel of sin management that is all too common, and fraught with problems.

The most obvious issue with this approach is that every addict is a master at deception. We lie. It's what addicts do. I've lied while looking in the eyes of my wife, my best friend, and my mentor. Next, this approach relies on external reinforcement. When removed, the compulsive and addictive behaviors return. Also, this form of accountability never deals with the heart. Jesus, on the other hand, said that sexual immorality begins in the heart (Matt. 15:19). Very rarely do I hear men discussing their hearts with one another. We don't have

a language for it. Finally, the man who lives under the cop accountability approach will eventually fail in one of two ways. He will suffer from a chronic sense of failing to measure up, which only serves to reinforce shameful core beliefs. Or he will succumb to pride (similar to the Pharisees of Jesus' day) resulting from his mastery of sin. Neither of these directions addresses what's actually going on. And they reinforce a gospel of sin management.

The next approach is what I call *coach accountability*. Our accountability partner plays the role of an instructor, trainer, and coach, who helps us manage our lives so we can keep moving forward. We are second-string players on God's team with a pretty good shot of making it to the spiritual big leagues. When we fail to perform well, we check in with the coach, who encourages us from the rulebook, sends us back in the game, and tells us to keep our eye on the ball. This approach implies that if we give it enough effort, time, and attention, we can earn a victory over sin and make our lives work. This "try harder" emphasis concerns itself less with sin management and more with the relentless effort to be good. It is a gospel of inspiration.

Coach accountability is better than *cop accountability*. At various times in our lives all of us need a friend or loved one to get in our face like a cop and say, "Stop!" In the same way, all of us periodically need encouragement, hope, and even training or equipping about how to do life. We occasionally need that coach who will come alongside us and inspire us to do our best. But ultimately we need someone to care for our hearts.

Every man needs *cardiologist accountability*. In the midst of my struggle, I lacked a safe place to talk about my brokenness. I had no language to talk about my heart and my inner world. Nobody ever asked me if lust was a struggle for me. No one ever asked me why at twenty-three years of age I had never gone on a date or had a girlfriend, or why I had a compulsive need to be funny. We need someone to ask us questions not only about our behavior but also about our hearts. We need a friend who will ask us questions about the lies we believe and help us interpret the stories that contribute to who we are today.

In the cardiologist approach we move from accountability to accessibility. We expose our hiddenness, but more than that, we acknowledge our brokenness. Instead of trying to manage our sin, or be inspired to obey, we recognize our need for transformation. We begin to allow God, and a few others, to walk into the messiness of our lives, and we learn that we are more than the sum of our brokenness.

Cardiologist accountability does not require a professional therapist or counselor. It begins with the assumption that our whole lives, including our brokenness, are the soil in which God grows us. The only requirements for becoming a cardiologist of this kind are a healthy curiosity, a desire to be a caring friend, and a willingness to grow in your understanding of the process of spiritual transformation.