

# 1 THE ACCOUNTABLE MAN

*BILL AND LARRY SAT DOWN FOR LUNCH at a corner table in the local coffee shop. After ordering, there was a moment of awkward silence. Then Larry opened the conversation. "Bill, I wanted to get together with you today because I feel I'm missing out on something in life."*

*Surprised, Bill chuckled and said, "You, Larry? You've got to be kidding."*

*"Why?" Larry asked, perplexed.*

*"Because it seems like you've got it all together. Great marriage and family, super job, solid Christian faith. I've often wished I could be more like you. What could be missing from your life?"*

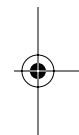
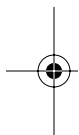
*"Well, what's missing is . . ." Larry paused and looked away for a moment before finishing, "I really don't have any close friends."*

*Bill sat quietly for a second or two. "You really mean that, don't you?"*

*"Yeah. That's why I asked you to lunch today. To talk about that."*

*"Well, okay. But why me?"*

*"Because we've worked together on some things at*





*church," Larry replied, "and we've talked some at soccer with the kids. I guess I would just say I like you and would like to know if we could meet on some regular basis. I'd like to see if there's a friendship waiting to happen here."*

*After another short pause, Larry continued, "I feel kind of embarrassed admitting I don't have any friends. I also feel funny just coming out and asking you like this. But I don't know how else to start a friendship."*

*Bill took a sip of his coffee before answering. "You know, Larry, there are a lot of people who would want to be friends with you."*

*"There are?" Larry acted surprised. "Nobody ever calls me or asks me to do anything."*

*"Well, maybe that's because you send out some pretty strong signals about how busy you are. You're always talking about how many things you're juggling, that you travel so much you don't even have time for your own family. Who's going to ask you to do something more?"*

*"I guess you're right." Larry smiled, "But see, this is what I've always liked about you, even in our brief talks. You're one of the few men I know who will tell me the truth. I know that's what's missing in my life. I'm looking for a friend who cares enough to be honest and tell me what I need to hear."*

*"Well, I'd like that kind of friendship too," Bill said, looking straight at Larry. "But it would have to be mutual. I have a lot of the same needs you do. And I'd also like to kick back sometimes and just have fun, if we decide to spend more time together. Would you be up for that?"*





*"Sure. My life has a way of getting way too serious. Sometimes I feel like I'm going to break. I need some fun in my life."*

*Bill put down his coffee mug and said, "I think we should pray about this for a few days, then get back together and see where the Lord leads. We should check with our families about this too, because of the time commitment. Good friendships take time and attention."*

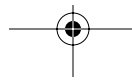
*"I think I just realized that if I'm too busy to have friends, I'm too busy. I'm not going to live like that anymore," Larry declared. "But I need help too, to change my old habits."*

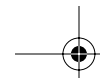
*"I think we might be a great help to each other," Bill said. "I'm excited to see what God's going to do here."*



It was well over a decade ago that I learned one of the truest, most important and lasting lessons ever about how to live a lifestyle of continued renewal in Jesus.

I had been drifting for about two years in a period I would now describe as the doldrums of a self-satisfied Christian life. A ship that is in the doldrums has entered into a region where the wind has died. There is no surge of energy to power the ship forward and keep it



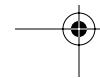
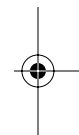
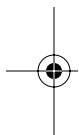


on course. Light and shifting winds put the ship into a pattern of directionless meandering.

That's how I would describe that former period of my Christian life—directionless meandering. The greatest danger in it was how comfortable I had begun to feel in that place. I know now how lifeless my Christianity had become, but back then things seemed to be going pretty well for me in my family, my job, my relationships and—yes—even my “religious” life.

It's easy to settle for something less, even when we know deep down that God wants us to experience the very best. When comforts and worldly distractions obscure the larger vision in our lives, we're good at rationalizing our present state of affairs. Rationalizations are a wonderful help in making us feel fine about our life when in reality many things may be on the slide.

What brought the situation to a head for me was signing a contract with my publisher to do a book called *Temptations Men Face*. I received an advance (which I quickly spent) and then went several months without being able to write a word. Things got tense. I finally took a morning off work and stayed home for the purpose of getting to the bottom of this with God. I sat on our back deck in the sun and prayed fervently. I was crying out to God to do something to break through my severe case of writer's block. I was convinced that my inability to work on this project was an attack of the evil one. But somewhere during that extended time of prayer I began getting a faint sense that God might not be swallowing my line of reasoning. At



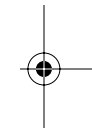


one point I stopped to take a breath, and God started talking to me.

Before long, I had written down on my note pad a number of areas in my life that God was putting his finger on. He was basically saying to me that morning that he would not bless my writing project on temptation while I was ignoring areas in my life where my behaviors and attitudes were less than pleasing to him. He was showing me that my refusal to deal with these sin areas was hurting my relationship with him, standing in the way of my personal growth and blessing, and keeping me from moving forward in ministry and service to him. Writing a book on resisting temptation while I was in denial in some important areas of integrity was a hypocrisy God refused to bless.

I repented on my knees. I experienced in my heart what Paul meant when he said, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation [or for me, deliverance] and leaves no regret" (2 Cor 7:10). God led me then to make a covenant with him regarding the things that were listed on my pad. I could sense the energy of the Holy Spirit working in me. It felt like light and life. The excitement was motivating and empowering. But almost immediately I realized that God wanted me to take another step. As doubts crept in, and as I sensed that I would soon face some strong temptations to settle again for life in the doldrums, even to return to sin, I knew God wanted me to take a further step to help make this renewal experience lasting.

It was clear what God wanted me to do. The next



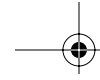


morning I was meeting with my small group of men; it was my opportunity to bring my areas of struggle into the light and ask for the prayer and support of these men who loved me. I shared the experience of the previous morning and asked my close friends to hold me accountable to the covenant I had made with God. They agreed to pray for me and ask me regularly how I was doing. I knew I could count on their love and support, and I knew they were the kind of men who would challenge me without judging or dismissing me.

That was the day I learned the power of accountable relationships to help a man deepen his walk with God. I have never been the same since that day when I risked opening my life more fully to those men. I learned that day, and in the months and years to come, what Christian friendship is really all about and how God intends to use trusted relationships to purify our character and continually transform and revitalize our relationship with him. Within days of that small group meeting, my writer's block was gone and I was well into the book.

The lesson I learned can be stated in this principle: *Renewal begins in repentance and continues in obedience, strengthened by accountability.* God had to lead me to the place where I saw my sin for what it was and felt true sorrow over it. He also led me into repentance, which means turning away from the sin and toward obedience, depending on the power of God for life change. The final step was a step into the light where I shared my good intentions with others whose love, support





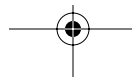
and prayer would help me stand firm. That is how we begin to live the accountable life.

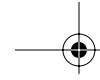
#### ACCOUNTABILITY IS NOT FOR SISSIES

As we mature in Christ, we at some point realize that a significant change is taking place in us. We are developing a hunger to feed others in the way we ourselves have been nourished, to make a difference in the lives of those around us for Jesus' sake. The experience is both an awakening and a deepening that occur supernaturally as Christ is formed in us (Gal 4:19). Early in our Christian lives it is all about us—what God is doing for us, the blessings we are receiving. But now, more and more, we want it all to be for him.

This shift in the tectonic plates of our spiritual nature changes the entire landscape of our lives. The emerging vision brings a revitalized life in Christ. But along with the excitement of this new season of life come new and weighty challenges.

We see more clearly what we with all our heart want to become. And we see just as clearly how much we still need to grow in order to be everything we hope to be for the Lord. The new challenges at this stage can seem overwhelming. Doubts flood in. How will we stay the course and overcome all those unhealthy habits that have held us back in the past? Who will help us discern which of God's great promises is most applicable to our present season of life? How will we evaluate with any confidence whether we are making progress with God? To whom can we turn for confirmation of





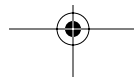
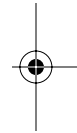
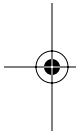
God's call for our lives? Who will stand with us in the battle when the going gets rough?

Of course, the Lord is our strength and guide in all these matters. But in his wisdom, he has also given us the gift of brothers in the body of Christ. Brothers in Christ will walk with us and stand by us, and they can become wonderful spiritual friends to bring the guidance of God's Word to us while supporting us in prayer.

Life in God is not just about God and me alone. God's design for Christian living is about God and me and others. The Christian life needs both vertical and horizontal love relationships in order to be complete. It is loving God with all my heart and loving my neighbor as myself. "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). We are made for each other in the body of Christ.

In Ephesians 3:14-19 the apostle Paul describes God's design for life in the Christian community. In this passage Paul says that God is our Father and that all of us who believe are members of his eternal family. He prays for us to grasp "together" the true nature of God's amazing unconditional love. This love is the source for everything we do in our Christian lives. As Christian men, our main task in life is to learn better how to both receive God's love and extend God's love to others.

To learn to love as God loves is the essence of our call. And living in intimate relationship with others who claim Christ as Savior is the school that God determined would best develop in us this kind of mature, self-sacrificial living. To learn to love as Jesus loves is



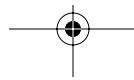


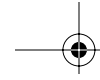
our path toward mature manhood. Beautifully, God intends us to enjoy both the challenge and the encouragement that come from being deeply engaged with other growing men in Christian community.

#### WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY, AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

In essence, the accountable man is a Christian man who is willing to risk opening his life to others in order to become answerable for his attitudes and actions. In this book I will be suggesting that it is essential for us to have at least one friend we can count on to speak the truth to us in love (Eph 4:15). The Word of God is truth to guide our lives. But our human nature, which the Bible calls our "flesh," is at war with God (Rom 8:7-12). That is why we need other spiritual men to help us see where there is inconsistency between what we say we believe and how we actually live. It takes great maturity for a man to risk entering into this kind of honest relationship. When you are ready to take this step, you are stating your serious commitment to be everything you can be for Christ.

As we grow in Christ and in relationship with others who love us, we will grow in our ability to trust God and to trust close Christian friends. We can overcome our fear of disclosure. And as we learn to take risks in relationship, our circle of accountability will expand. We will find that we are giving to an increasing number of men the right to examine us, to question, to give counsel, to pray with us, to share life with us at the deeper levels. The greater our influence of leader-





ship, the broader should be our circle of accountable relationships. If we are serious about developing godly character, we will choose to be in healthy, mutual relationships with others, learning better how to live and work in partnership.

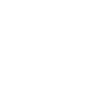
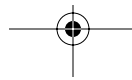
If we desire to develop mature Christian character, we will quickly realize that we need this strength, insight and support. If we are really listening, wisdom from above will reveal to us early on that we have an innate sinful tendency to excuse ourselves, rationalize our behavior or just plain live in denial. We rationalize when we come up with creative excuses to cover up our sin. Denial is blindness, our inability to even see the sinfulness in many of our choices.

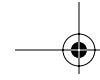
Scripture teaches that if we are left to our own devices, we are hopelessly lost. We will only deceive ourselves and try to deceive others if we can. The truth about our natural inclinations is captured in the following Scripture verses:

The heart is deceitful above all things  
and beyond cure.  
Who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. (Gen 6:5)

He who trusts in himself is a fool,  
but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe.  
(Prov 28:26)



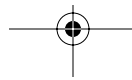
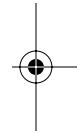


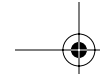
A Christian man who gladly enters into relationships that provide regular face-to-face encounters with other men is a man who walks in wisdom. We need to lovingly get in each other's faces to help break down our natural tendencies toward conducting secret lives or living in constant rationalization and denial. We all need good friends in the Lord who can reflect the truth to us in such a way that we will be able to see clearly when we are just playing games with God.

#### CHOOSING ACCOUNTABILITY

Choosing to become accountable to others takes real courage. There are risks in the relationship. Accountability will not work unless there is real honesty and vulnerability between the men regarding their struggles and shortfalls. The relationship requires a commitment of time, too, as the men involved take on the challenge of praying for one another and meeting regularly enough to be an encouragement to each other. A man in an accountable relationship will have to be learning more each day how to confront in love and to challenge his brothers without bringing unnecessary judgment. The most beneficial context in which men can encourage one another to be everything they can be in God is always a nonjudgmental environment of unconditional love, forgiveness and encouragement.

The concept of accountability is rooted in Scripture. The following are just a few verses that suggest the importance of developing accountable relationships.





Wounds from a friend can be trusted,  
but an enemy multiplies kisses. (Prov 27:6)

Pride only breeds quarrels,  
but wisdom is found in those who take advice.  
(Prov 13:10)

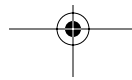
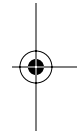
He who ignores discipline comes to poverty  
and shame,  
but whoever heeds correction is honored.  
(Prov 13:18)

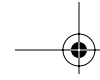
As iron sharpens iron,  
so one man sharpens another. (Prov 27:17)

Not to be shaped by the Word is to be shaped by the world (Rom 12:2). I believe there is a new call from God to Christian men today to enter wholeheartedly into this costly battle for integrity. Strength for fighting the good fight over the long haul comes from learning to stand arm in arm and heart to heart with other men.

Forming growing and lasting friendships does not come naturally for many men. But we can learn to develop quality mutual relationships. We can learn to become mutual mentors and spiritual directors for one another. We can learn the skills to be better encouragers, sincere forgivers, holy listeners, unconditional lovers, wise counselors, spiritual guides, bold challengers, Christlike leaders.

Every Christian man has the potential to be a strong leader, a man of influence for Christ in his world. But effective kingdom leadership requires a willingness to





submit our lives to Christ on a daily basis and to submit ourselves to the godly leadership of other men.

FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

1. List reasons why being in an accountable relationship can strengthen your walk with God.
2. Why do you think the author says, "The greater our influence of leadership, the broader should be our circle of accountable relationships"?
3. This chapter says that the tough work of holding one another accountable happens best in a nonjudgmental environment of unconditional love. Explain in your own words what you think this kind of relational environment looks like.
4. Which of the Scripture passages mentioned in this chapter are particularly meaningful to you and why?

