

Encouraging Accountability
1 Cor 16:10-18, 1 Thess 5:11-24

Brothers and sisters in Christ, back in 1980 something I was about sixteen years old – in grade 10 at the Ottawa Christian High school, and I decided that since I liked to DJ and do lighting and stage production that I would host a dance party and invite my entire school, which wasn't difficult because it was a very small school of apx 80 students.

So I booked the fellowship hall at a local church in my neighborhood, rented some big speakers, lights, a fog machine, got my DJ equipment all set up and ready and starting practicing my set-list... and started to advertise this function to the rest of my school.

Now back in my day, Christian schools didn't host their own dances – because dancing was still considered to be a “worldly amusement” right up there with drinking and smoking and gambling.

So my high school had never had a dance, nor had anyone attempted do something like this before – so most of my classmates thought it was a pretty cool idea and I ended up getting a pretty good turnout for it.

But I'll never forget receiving a phone call a week or so before the dance - from some lady I'd never met - who had heard about my dance party through one of my fellow students who went to her church...

And she was terribly vexed about the prospect of us young, impressionable Christian teenagers being in a dark room, with loud music playing, lights flashing, dancing together.

And she was certain that this experience – while chaperoned, and drug and alcohol free – would be the first steps into a life of sin for someone, as that had been her experience because she had enjoyed dancing to music in the bars when she was a young girl.

So she pleaded with me to cancel this dance and do something else instead.

And brothers and sisters in Christ – so often when we talk about how accountability is a part of the development of our Christian character, it's these kinds of experiences which come to mind where someone comes right out and asks us if it's right that a Christian does that sort of thing?

Do you think it's appropriate for a Christian to... Drink beer? Watch that movie? Own such a large house? Wear that kind of clothing? Host a dance party? People are watching us you know... and what if you cause a weaker brother or sister in Christ to stumble and sin?

And so the whole idea of accountability in our Christian Character has been tainted by these kinds of moralistic concerns, and most people today would be rather put off by someone who attempted this and would tell the concerned party to "mind their own business."

So holding each other accountable for living out our Christian character is not something that we tend to practice anymore.

And we simply assume that because our fellow Christians are regularly attending worship on Sunday morning that their personal and private lives are honoring to Christ, and that they are applying what they are learning on Sunday mornings to how they live from Monday to Saturday.

But friends, as many of you have found out – it can be a mistake to simply assume things.

I remember years ago, a young man whom I was mentoring in youth ministry coming to tell me that his girlfriend was pregnant and his plans to continue studies for youth ministry now had to be put on hold for other more pressing concerns.

And my first thought was – Argh, why hadn't I asked him if he was keeping proper physical boundaries in his dating relationship! I was mentoring him...

And my next thought was how could I have so quickly forgotten what it was like to be a young man dealing with those sorts of challenges? I should have known he needed some accountability there.

I had just **assumed** that since he was a Christian ministry student at a Christian university and had an obvious love for Jesus and passion for ministry that he would know what was right and simply do that.

However as we know all too well from our own personal and private lives, understanding and even believing what is right doesn't always mean that we will do it – that's the effect of our sinful nature...

Of course this is why the Great Commission to *“go and make disciples of all nations”* includes the instruction of *“teaching them to obey everything that I [Jesus] have commanded you...”* (Matt 28:20)

So brothers and sisters somewhere in between assuming that fellow Christians will just do the right thing, and being an overly concerned busybody...

There is the kind of accountability that we need to practice with each other so that we are learning and growing in our obedience of Jesus' commands... where we are *“encouraging one another and building each other up”* as Paul instructs the Thessalonian Christians to do in our scripture passage this morning. (vs. 11)

Now, before we all run off and start “holding each other accountable” - we should look at the rest of what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5 so that we gain more understanding as to what exactly is involved in this and the wisdom needed for it.

So Paul begins by asking the Thessalonians to acknowledge those who work hard among them and care for them in the Lord and admonish them. (vs. 12)

Now I suppose Paul could have said it more simply as it does in Hebrews 13:17 *“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority...”*

But instead Paul describes what church leaders do – they work hard among the congregation, they care for them in matters of following Jesus, and they admonish them.

And he asks the Thessalonians to *acknowledge* them, which we typically understand as having someone stand up while we say thank-you for all your hard work and efforts and then we clap to show our appreciation.

But the full sense of acknowledge here is that we are to know and understand and perceive what church leadership is really about, which can be summarized from this verse as a tiresome, and wearying efforts to instruct and correct people so that they will obey all that Jesus has commanded.

You see brothers and sisters it’s important to perceive that the work of ministers and elders and leaders in the church is not

first and foremost about putting on a well-run worship service... or an interesting thought provoking sermon, or making sure the bills get paid...

Their primary job is to admonish us in the Lord so that we are growing in our ability to obey Jesus Christ - as Paul explains in Eph 4: 11-12 *“Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...”*

And we don’t acknowledge this by having someone stand up at the front on Sunday every so often and say “thanks for all your hard work...” with a round of applause afterwards.

No, brothers and sisters in Christ we acknowledge them, we hold them in highest regard in love, by allowing them to hold us accountable for what they are teaching us to do – which is learning to obey Christ.

You see if we are going to know how to hold each other accountable for our Christian Character, then those whom Christ has called into leadership in the Church must make sure they are demonstrating that for us and that we are learning it through experiencing it from them.

And Paul wraps up this opening section with his own admonishment; *“live in peace with each other!”* (vs.13) and there are two reasons for this reminder friends.

First, we may not realize that church leaders are there to hold us accountable and we will probably have a bit of a hostile reaction and get our backs up when we first experience the leadership asking us *“how are you doing with loving your neighbor?”* or *“are you spending time reading the scriptures?”* or *“are you making worship a weekly priority?”* and so on...

But this is what they are supposed to do – it’s not inappropriate or out of line... so don’t be angry or upset with them for doing so.

Secondly, if being held accountable by leadership can put us out a little bit and tempt us to get angry – then being held accountable by each other, as regular Christians – can really be difficult, and has the potential to put us into positions of conflict with each other.

But, if our leadership is modeling good accountability practice with us then the rest of us can’t shy away from exercising this part of being the body of Christ together.

Paul’s instructions in vs 14-21 are directed to the regular brothers and sisters in the church and describe a mutual accountability.

In fact if we are talking about “forging” Christian Character – the mutual accountability part of this is the “forging” part.

So far this month we’ve looked at humility - and it’s certainly helpful to hear God’s Word speak to us about that part of our character, and have the Holy Spirit instruct us on it – but truly it’s the accountability involved in being asked on a regular

basis *“how humble and gentle have you been this past week?”* which starts to heat us up, and hammers us into how we are to be shaped – forging our character to be more and more Christ-like.

And friends the best place for us to hold each other mutually accountable - is in Christ Care groups and ministry teams.

And as one who is called by the Lord to care for you – I would admonish you to – for the sake of your spiritual growth – as we are able to meet together again, set aside time to become part of a small group or ministry team at Valleyview were you can experience this mutual accountability.

Now for the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul urges them to focus on *“warning those who are idle, encouraging the disheartened, and helping the weak.”* (vs. 14) Additionally they are to *“make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong but to always strive to do what is good for each other, and for everyone else.”* (vs.15)

This is what their mutual accountability would include, and it is a good guideline for us as well – our mutual accountability must include warnings, encouragement and help, whenever necessary, especially in situations where we have been wronged by a fellow Christian or someone outside the church.

In these cases mutual accountability can become an excuse to retaliate or take revenge – but we are to make sure that accountability is something that is good for the other person. It may not always be pleasant, comfortable or nice for them – but it is supposed to be for their good.

And one of the ways Paul showed us that we could cultivate gentleness - that sweet reasonableness in ourselves which allows us to deal with conflict in such a way was to *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”* (Phil 4:4-6)

Which sounds very similar to what Paul instructs the Thessalonians in vs. 16-18 where he writes *“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

So brothers and sisters, rejoice always because your salvation does not depend upon how Christian your character is, or how well you are doing in being held accountable – Romans 5:8 reminds us that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners!

So accountability is not a matter of our salvation, but a matter of co-operating with the Holy Spirit to work that salvation out - through every area of your person and life, and that is not always going to be pleasant...

Nor is it always a pleasant job for Christian leaders or fellow brothers and sisters to hold you accountable for your co-operation with the Holy Spirit in those areas in our lives where we resist Him and struggle with Him – it will be conflicted.

However – we are to bring this conflict from accountability before God; pray continually and give thanks because we are experiencing this conflict as a result of the Holy Spirit’s desire to sanctify us, because this is what God wants for us – that more and more we are in Christ Jesus.

So Paul continues on in vs 19; *“Do not quench the Spirit!”*

Brothers and sisters do not avoid mutual accountability because it gets your back up, because you don’t want someone messing in your personal life, or because you would rather avoid conflict...

Instead, listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you, as it comes through the gift of prophecy in your Christian leaders and fellow Christians, so that you can co-operate with the Spirit’s work of sanctifying you - *“do not treat prophecies with contempt...”* (vs.20)

Conversely brothers and sisters let us not treat the gift of prophecy with contempt by passing off our own opinions or

concerns as a word from the Lord - when they are not, or by not speaking, in humility, a genuine word of the Lord when the Holy Spirit gives us one.

So, having covered the role of church leadership, what mutual accountability involves, how to be in a reasonable state to receive and give accountability, and highlighting that this is a big part of how the Holy Spirit sanctifies us... Paul now gives us the basic guideline for mutual accountability in vs. 21.

This guideline keeps us from just assuming... and prevents us from being busybodies, Paul says *“test everything, hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.”*

You see friends, while many people might say that concerned lady had no business phoning me up and asking me to cancel my dance party, the fact is that she prompted me to think about what I was doing and whether or not I could truly do this in good conscience.

I had to learn how to test what she was saying, and also test what I was doing.

So I was forced to think about what I believed, to evaluate how she presented her concerns and determine if I had a biblical basis for the sorts of things I wanted to do...

Now mind you I didn't do this all on the spot during our phone conversation – that mostly consisted of me listening to her and then politely responding with something like *“thanks for sharing your viewpoint on this but I don't think I see it the same way...”*

But brothers and sisters this is the heart of mutual accountability, this is what it is for... to help us test everything and determine what is good and hold on to it and reject what is evil.

And lest we think that is too cut and dried, that it's pretty obvious what is good and what is evil we would be wise to

remember that if it truly was... we wouldn't need our leaders and our fellow Christians' help in this process.

The scriptures often warn us about being deceived.

2 Corinthians 11:13-14 Paul says *"For such people are false apostles, **deceitful** workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light."*

Jesus says in Luke 21:8 *"Watch out that you are not **deceived**. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them."*

Paul confesses in Romans 7:11 *"For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, **deceived** me..."*

And most disconcertingly Jeremiah 17:9 says *"The heart is **deceitful** above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"*

And remember the warning from Proverbs 14:12 which says *"There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death."*

So brothers and sisters in Christ, for the sake of the great commission and teaching disciples to obey Jesus, for the sake of being intentional and deliberate about forming our Christian character, and for the sake of making certain that we are not deceived and led astray...

I admonish you and urge you in the Lord Jesus Christ to acknowledge those who do the hard work among you and care for you in the Lord and who hold you accountable.

But brothers and sisters – remember that our Lord is gentle and his burden is not a heavy one, (Matt 11:30) he will not blow out a smoldering wick or break a bruised reed (Isa 42:3)

And so while this has been a bit of a blunt word, perhaps even a hard word for us to receive this morning – let us allow it to

be sealed into our hearts as Paul sealed it into the hearts of the Thessalonians with his closing blessing.

So wherever you are at in terms of mutual accountability, whatever you experience to this point may have been – good or bad, remember accept the good and reject the bad... and receive this encouragement from the Lord.

That God himself, the God of peace, will sanctify you through and through. So that your whole spirit, including your soul and body will be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it.

Amen.