

Reminders Are More Effective Than Rebukes

by Tullian Tchividjian

Are you tired of being told that if you're *really* serious about God, you must be in an "accountability group?" You know the ones I'm talking about. The ones where you and a small group of "friends" arrange for a time each week to get together and pick each other apart—uncovering layer after layer after layer of sin? The ones where all parties involved believe that the guiltier we feel the more holy we are? The ones where you confess your sin to your friends but it's never enough? No matter what you unveil, they're always looking for you to uncover something deeper, darker, and more embarrassing than what you've fessed up to. It's usually done with such persistent invasion that you get the feeling they're desperately looking for something in you that will make them feel better about themselves.

Well, I hate those groups!

The reason I hate them is not *only* because I don't like accountability. Of course, I don't—none of us really do. We like to do our own thing without anybody correcting us or telling us we need to change. But God has been gracious to me by giving me a remarkable Italian wife, three children who aren't afraid to tell me I'm wrong, a nosy—albeit loving—mother, a professional counselor for a father (although he died last year), a vast array of close-knit siblings (six to be exact), some very good friends, and a group of church elders who all know me better than I know myself. They all keep me grounded and keep me real. They all know when something's wrong. They correct me when I need it. I don't like it, but they do. And I thank God for all of them!

The real reason, however, that I hate the kind of "accountability groups" described above is because the primary (almost exclusive, in my experience) focus is always on our sin, not on our Savior. Because of this, these groups breed self-righteousness, guilt, and the almost irresistible temptation to pretend—to be less than honest. I can't tell you how many times I've been in "accountability groups" where there has been little to no attention given to the gospel whatsoever. There's no reminder of what Christ has done for our sin—"cleansing us from its guilt *and* power"—and the resources that are already ours by virtue of our union with him. These groups produce a "do more, try harder" moralism that robs us of the joy and freedom Jesus paid dearly to secure for us. They start with the narcissistic presupposition that Christianity is all about cleaning up and getting better—it's all about personal improvement.

But it's not!

When *the* goal becomes conquering our sin instead of soaking in the conquest of our Savior, we actually begin to shrink spiritually. Sinclair Ferguson rightly points this out:

Those who have almost forgotten about their own spirituality because their focus is so exclusively on their union with Jesus Christ and what He has accomplished are those who are growing and exhibiting fruitfulness. Historically speaking, whenever the piety of a particular group is focused on OUR spirituality, that piety will eventually exhaust itself on its own resources. Only when our piety forgets about us and focuses on Jesus Christ will our piety be nourished by the ongoing resources the Spirit brings to us from the source of all true piety, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ironically, when we (or our "friends") focus mostly on our need to get better we actually get worse. We become neurotic and self-absorbed. Preoccupation with my guilt over God's grace makes me increasingly self-centered and morbidly introspective. Real Christian growth, according to Jeremiah Bourroughs (1600-1646), "comes not so much from our struggling and endeavors and resolutions, as it comes flowing to us from our union with him."

To be sure, we are called to "mortify the flesh", "put to death the misdeeds of the body", and to "cut off our hand" and "gouge out our eye" if they cause us to sin—and we need the help of other people to get this done. Sanctification is a community project.

But—and this is the point—our holiness is NOT what Christianity is all about! If it were, I and every other sinner out there would be in big, hopeless trouble.

Christianity is not first about our getting better, our obedience, our behavior, and our daily victory over remaining sin—as important as all these are. It's first about Jesus! It's about his person and substitutionary work—his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, session, and promised return. We are justified—and sanctified—by grace alone through faith alone in the finished work of Christ alone. So that even now, the banner under which Christians live reads, "It is finished."

The accountability I need, therefore, is the kind that corrects my natural tendency to focus on me—my obedience (or lack thereof), my performance (good or bad), my holiness—instead of on Christ and his obedience, performance, and holiness for me. We all possess a natural proclivity to turn God's good news announcement that we've been set free into a narcissistic program of self-improvement. We need to be held accountable for that (grin)!

Our calling is not to fix one another! So stop trying! You stop trying to fix me and I'll stop trying to fix you. Instead, why don't we "stir one another up to love and good deeds" by daily reminding one another, in humble love, of the riches we already possess in Christ. All the "good stuff" that is ours already in Christ settles at the bottom when we focus on ourselves more than Jesus (after all, Peter only began to sink when he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on his performance). John Owen said, "Holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and realizing of the gospel in our souls." And what is the gospel? Not my work for Jesus, but Jesus' work for me. In other words, holiness happens, not by looking at ourselves but by looking at Jesus. Therefore, it takes the loving act of our Christian brothers and sisters to remind us everyday of the gospel—that everything we need, and look for in things smaller than Jesus, are already ours "in Christ." When this happens, the "good stuff" rises to the top.

The Puritans used to say that far too many Christians live beneath the level of their privileges. Therefore, I need to be told by those around me that every time I sin I'm momentarily suffering from an identity crisis: forgetting who I *actually* belong to, what I *really* want at my remade core, and all that is *already* mine in Christ. The only way to deal with remaining sin long term is to develop a distaste for it in light of the glorious riches we already possess in Christ. I need my real friends to remind me of this—every day. Please tell me again and again that God doesn't love me more when I obey or less when I disobey. Knowing this actually enlarges my heart for God and therefore shrinks my hunger for sin. So, don't let me forget it. My life depends on it!

In her book [Because He Loves Me](#), Elyse Fitzpatrick writes about how important remembrance is in Christian growth:

One reason we don't grow in ordinary, grateful obedience as we should is that we've got amnesia; we've forgotten that we are cleansed from our sins. In other words, ongoing failure in sanctification (the slow process of change into Christlikeness) is the direct result of failing to remember God's love for us in the gospel. If we lack the comfort and assurance that his love and cleansing are meant to supply, our failures will handcuff us to yesterday's sins, and we won't have faith or courage to fight against them, or the love for God that's meant to empower this war. If we fail to remember our justification, redemption, and reconciliation, we'll struggle in our sanctification.

Christian growth, in other words, does not happen first by behaving better, but believing better—believing in bigger, deeper, brighter ways what Christ has already secured for sinners. I need my family and friends to remind me of this all the time.

Realizing the Colossian Christians were being tempted to buy counterfeit versions of salvation (self-improvement and freedom through rule-keeping being the main ones), Paul repeatedly reminds them of the treasure they already have in Christ. His point: don't buy false versions of what you already have. In 1:9-14, Paul sums things up by saying, essentially, "You will grow in your understanding of God's will, be filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding, increase in your knowledge of God, be strengthened with God's power which will produce joy filled patience and endurance (v.9-12a) *as you come to a greater realization that you've already been qualified, delivered, transferred, redeemed, and forgiven* (v.12b-14).

Paul understood that Gospel-driven change is rooted in remembrance. What Paul did for the Colossians is what we all need our Christian brothers and sisters to do for us as well: remind me first of what's been done, not what I must do. So, while rebukes are sometimes necessary, reminders are far more effective in the long run. Constant reminders of our Savior and the benefits he secured for sinners help us get better more so than constant rebukes of our sin.

The bottom line is this, Christian: because of Christ's work on your behalf, God does not dwell on your sin the way you do. So, relax and rejoice...and you'll actually start to get better. The irony, of course, is that it's only when we stop obsessing over our own need to be holy and focus instead on the beauty of Christ's holiness, that we actually become more holy! Not to mention, we start to become a lot easier to live with!

Will someone please keep reminding me of this?