

# Learning the life skill of Accountability

By Dave Batty

- ✓ “Just trust me!”
- ✓ “I can’t wait until I’m out of this house! These rules are just outrageous!”
- ✓ “Finally! Now that I’m in charge here, nobody is going to tell me what to do!”

Ever heard those statements, or similar ones? They all reveal a distorted view of accountability.

The American culture thrives on the belief—be in charge of your own destiny! Independence and personal rights are exalted above all else. All these issues surrounding freedom often lead to a distorted view of accountability.

In the name of freedom we dismiss the need for accountability—that’s only for the weak, the immature, those with problems.

- ❖ **How can accountability help me?**
- ❖ **When is accountability inappropriate?**
- ❖ **To whom should I make myself accountable?**
- ❖ **How can I make sure accountability will help me?**

“I’m a victim” is another theme in the American culture that leads to a distorted view of accountability. Several years ago when riots caused huge damage in Los Angeles, few if any of the looters were charged with any crimes.

Trial lawyers are now trying to sue the food industry on behalf of people who are overweight. This

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distorted view of accountability says that I’m not responsible for watching what I eat, someone else should be held accountable for the fact that I am overweight.

Misunderstandings of accountability lead some to take too much responsibility for what happens to others. Vera, a nurse, was caught up in her addiction, yet still functioning on her job. “After work each day I was helping my sister who needed daily medical care,” shared Vera. “One day I had to work a double shift. So I called my sister and said I was too tired to come—but what I really wanted to do was go get high.”

“Later I received a call that my sister had died,” shared Vera. “To this day I still feel accountable for her death.” It’s easy to beat up on ourselves when we see how we have failed.

Accountability also gets a bad reputation when people in authority are abusive. One young lady showed me her arms, with 2 inch lines all over—scars from her childhood. “My mom would heat a fork over the kitchen stove until it was red hot and then press it on my arms, and all over my back, too,” she stated. “That was her way of disciplining me.”

## How does accountability help?

What does accountability look like when it has its proper place in your life? First, accountability is your friend. Responsible people use accountability to help them grow. When properly used, it enables people to experience more freedom in their lives, not less.

Yvonne, working as a dental assistant, supported her drug habit by writing her own prescriptions. Now charged with 196 felonies, she stated, “If I had been able to confide in just one person, I don’t think I would have written 196 illegal prescriptions.”

If accountability is going to have its greatest benefit in your life,

you must embrace it and say, “I want to be accountable.” This does not come naturally to most of us. Our human nature fights this and says—don’t tell me what to do! Mind your own business!

But if we would begin to see the benefits of accountability, we would see that not only is it our friend, but it protects us, it helps us develop self control. It spurs growth, opening doors to responsible living, and better decision-making skills in our lives.

### When should I start?

The ideal time to start learning about accountability is when one is a young child, and parents should be the primary teachers of this important life skill.

Parents of teens often find

themselves in the middle of a fiery conflict when they try to hold their teens accountable. If parents give up and just let their teens make all their decisions, they rob them of the protection that God wants parents to provide their children.

We can’t change the past, and so whatever your past experiences are—we have to look ahead. Today is the best time to begin improving your use of accountability in your life.

Accountability touches our lives in many areas whether we like it or not. When we attended school, teachers made us do assignments, and take tests.

The IRS holds you accountable for paying your taxes. They don’t just send you a letter and say, help us in any way you can.

The police hold us accountable for the way we drive, and where we park. If we ignore the laws, they hold us accountable by giving us a ticket, a fine, or even jail time.

But these forms of accountability do not automatically make us stronger or better. For some, we obey just to avoid the negative consequences.

God states that He also holds us accountable, and how we live determines where we will spend eternity. “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” (Hebrews 9:27 NIV)

The day we die, God will judge us, and hold us accountable for our lives. How much better it will be if we learn to be accountable to God today and see the greater benefits of it now, rather than waiting until the day we die.

### The parents’ role in accountability

“My parents were never there for me when I was a child,” shared Heidi. “I was on my own at age 10. When I was 19, I had my first baby. If I would have had the right kind of accountability in my home life, I wonder how different things would have been in my life.”

With children, you don’t need their permission to hold them accountable, you have that God-given responsibility. But as they reach the teen years, they need to hear from their parents the in-depth explanations of why accountability is such a vital life skill to develop.

James Dobson tells of a family that wanted to teach their children about accountability in a positive way. They told their young children that at each meal

they wanted them to put their napkin on their lap before they started eating. If they failed to do that, they would have to leave the table, go to the next room and count to 10 out loud.

The father shared the results. “It worked! But what was most embarrassing was that I was the one most often having to leave the table and count to 10.”

Parents have a key role in helping their children learn these lessons early in life. If they fail to do this, their children will face this as adults only then it will be much harder.

“My mom left me when I was 15,” explained Michelle. “I was on my own, and soon headed down the wrong path. I was accountable only to myself, and that was not very wise.”

### How do I get started?

Especially for teens and adults, if accountability is going to have real benefit in your life, then you have to be willing to say:

“I want to be accountable.”

“I give you permission to ask me tough questions.”

“I commit myself to be honest with you, even when it is embarrassing.”

“I am determined to grow.”

Coming to the place of saying, “I want to be accountable to someone,” that is a key first step. It takes courage. If you really want to grow, then accountability will be your friend.

But who should you pick? Let’s face it—some people are not safe—they cannot be trusted with this responsibility. It’s important to find a person of good character. But it also

depends on what area of your life you ask them to hold you accountable.

If you have determined that you want to get more exercise by daily walking, all you need is someone who will walk with you, or someone who will check up to see if you are following through on your commitment.

But if you are wanting to make

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### *Accountability at its heart is a process of developing self control.*

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yourself accountable to deal with personal weaknesses in your life, such as your anger problem, temptations, or other deeper character issues, then it is important to choose someone who has godly character in their lives. If you don't know someone who fits, ask your pastor or another safe person for recommendations.

Once you have identified your target person, tell them what you want. Ask if they will hold you accountable. You will need to set the boundaries for how you want them to help you. For accountability to work, it must have a specific schedule. How often will you talk? Daily? Weekly? Who will initiate the calls or appointments?

Heather had been using drugs, but wanted to get a job. She had a connection with the manager who told her, "Show me you can stay clean for 30 days, and I will give you a job."

"He called me every day," she shared, "often several times a day, even late at night to see if I was home. He asked specifics about where I was going, who I was spending my time with. After two

weeks of this he said, 'You need a residential program. Go to Teen Challenge.' "

"I thought it was just to finish off the last two weeks before he gave me a job," stated Heather. But she soon learned that Teen Challenge was a much longer program—and she stayed. Now she can see that making herself accountable set her on a path that truly brought the right kind of help into her life.

### **Determine to be honest**

Choosing a safe person is a key first step in being accountable. But even with a good mentor, you still have to determine to be honest with that person.

One young lady told me, "My parents held me accountable as a teen. However, I came to a point in my life when I didn't want it. I ran from it. And soon my life took a turn for the worse. I was still making lots of money at my job, but I was blowing it on drugs and other things. Soon I was in debt over my head.

"I had to keep telling bigger lies," she continued. "Looking back,

I see how important it is to be truthful to those who are trying to hold you accountable. If I had been truthful, I would have avoided a lot of hard knocks in my life."

### **Create boundaries**

Choosing a safe mentor, choosing to be honest, even when it hurts. These are both essential. Another key issue is structuring specific boundaries into the accountability process. There needs to be some way to measure your progress. If you are seeking to grow in a particular area of your life, set specific goals. Learn how to bring the Bible into this learning process. What truths in God's word provide direction?

The verification of accountability is essential if you are really going to make progress. For the person who has struggled with using drugs, accountability can mean submitting to random drug tests. For those who need accountability for the way they spend their money—keeping receipts for everything they buy, and then confirming that it all fits within the budget plan.

### **Accountability--healthy or sick?**

There needs to be a balance between no accountability and too much of it. Too much accountability, or the wrong kind leads to co-dependency, a very unhealthy relationship. It's unhealthy to depend on someone else to make all your decisions for you (speaking about teens and adults, not little children).

If I make myself accountable to you it does not mean giving up my obligation to make my own decisions. Healthy

accountability means I give you permission to ask me tough questions. It's OK to insist that I explain the reasons behind my decisions—to insist that I consider the consequences of my decisions, and accept full responsibility for my decisions.

Healthy accountability means that I do give an account of my actions. Healthy accountability means I seek advice so I can function better in responding to all the challenges I face in my daily living.

Many people find journaling helpful. Write down your daily progress, or struggles. What were the specific opportunities you faced today that relate to this area of your life? You don't have to reveal this to anyone else, unless you choose to do so.

So many of us live with great fear of what people would think if they knew about our problems. We live by the version of the scripture that says, "If you confess your faults one to another, you will be destroyed!" But what God's word really says is, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:16 NIV)

God says that when we make ourselves accountable to another safe person, we open ourselves up to experience God's healing.

Not only does accountability feel risky, it is also hard work. It's much easier to live in denial and stay in our comfort zone. Paul saw how challenging this is. He compares life to running a race. "I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. <sup>27</sup>No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." (1 Corinthians 9:26-27 NIV)

Accountability is the path to developing self-control. Paul makes this powerfully clear—"I beat my body, and make it my slave..." (vs. 27) If we want to achieve the greatest possible benefit from accountability, we have to choose the painful path of facing our weaknesses, and demanding change in our own lives.

Accountability pushes us out of our comfort zone. As we embrace accountability as our friend, we can reap the benefits in our lives with growth that leads to deepening character, more self control, and greater effectiveness to achieving all that God has created us to do.

## Learning the life skill of Accountability Discussion Guide

The following questions can be used for your personal reflection on this topic, or it can be used as a guide for a group discussion. If this is used in a group setting, please understand that you are not required to disclose the specific details of past sins, failures, or personal experiences.

1. What are some of the childhood memories you have of accountability? What impact did those experiences have on your growth?
2. Read Daniel 1:3-17. How does Daniel make himself accountable? What makes this an act of rebellion or an act of obedience?
3. How challenging is it for you to find a safe person to whom you can be accountable?
4. Read Matthew 12:36. How does this teaching of Jesus speak to the issue of accountability to God?
5. Read Philippians 4:8-9. How does this scripture speak to the issue of accountability of our thoughts?
6. Accountability is a tool for developing self control.
  - A. How would you assess the quality of self control in your life?
  - B. In what areas of your life do you need to develop more self control?
  - C. How can accountability help you develop self control in these areas of your life?
  - D. Where can you start this week? Who is the person to whom you can be accountable? What will be the goals or boundaries that you will focus on for change and growth? What scriptures in the Bible speak to this area in your life?



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