

ACCOUNTABILITY: Pursuing Vital Relationships Part One: Getting Ready

by Jim Clayton

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." -- Ecclesiastes 4:8-12

It occurs to me that, as we keep emphasizing accountability and vital relationships with other men, we need to provide some information and assistance for those who are interested. I am convinced that many men are not in an accountability relationship either because they don't understand what it is, or because they do not know how to get started. Hopefully, through a series of articles, you will be better equipped to begin, maintain and ultimately benefit from having vital relationships with a few other men.

WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY?

"Face to face, brother to brother. . .Face to face, one friend to another. . ." Does that sound familiar? "Man to man, shoulder to shoulder. . .Man to man, serving each other. . ." If you went to Promise Keepers in '93 or '94, you may recognize this tune. "Brother to Brother we'll strengthen each other. . .Working together, we're building the Kingdom of God." It gives me goosebumps just typing the words! This could easily be called "The Accountability Song," because it really hits on some key points of accountability:

- *"Face to face. . ." **Being accountable to someone means you sit face to face, look that person in the eye and honestly, openly discuss what is going on in your lives.***
- *"Shoulder to Shoulder. . ." **Accountability means standing by your brother's side through thick and thin.** One is not above the other; both are equal.*
- *"We'll Strengthen each other. . ." **Through vital relationships, we become stronger, as we help each other through struggles, temptations and shortfalls, and as we encourage one another towards spiritual growth.** "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." (Proverbs 27:17). Did you know that swords can actually get sharper during a sword fight? How? Because, as they come into contact, they knock off the small rough spots on the blades, and serve to smooth each other; thus producing an even more finely honed cutting edge. In the same way, men sharpen one another by coming into contact and "smoothing out the rough edges."*

Let me talk about **what accountability is not**: It is not guys getting together and talking about how often they have sex with their wives. It is not guys sitting around naked beating drums. It is not guys getting in touch with their "inner child." **It is not simply another support group or Bible Study.** It is not wimps getting together and whining about how unfair life is. It is not men sitting around bashing women.

Accountability is. . .

A few men getting together to share their lives. (I think two to four is an ideal number.) Guys getting to know each other beyond the casual and superficial; beyond "sports and the weather." Brothers allowing themselves to be challenged, and held to a higher standard than the world would dictate. Men being honest with each other about their struggles and shortfalls. Guys praying together, and for each other. **Brothers growing together toward Christlikeness, reaching their full potential as men of God.** And all of this takes place in an atmosphere of love and acceptance, without judgment. *"How good and pleasant it is, when brothers live together in unity!"* (Psalms 133:1)

The Bible tells us to:

- Love each other. (John 15:17)
- Serve one another in love. (Galatians 5:13)
- Be kind and compassionate to one another. (Ephesians 4:32)
- Carry each other's burdens. (Galatians 6:2)
- Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other. (James 5:16)
- Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. (Romans 12:10)
- Accept one another. (Romans 15:7)
- Encourage one another and build each other up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Spur one another on toward love and good deeds. (Hebrews 10:24)

I could go on, but I think you get the idea. **You are, in fact already accountable to many people:** Your family, your employer, your friends and so on. But those relationships differ from the "vital relationships" we are talking about here. Typically, accountability is automatic, or "part of the job." The difference with "vital relationship" accountability is that it would not normally occur, or even be expected to occur. It is voluntary and intentional; not because I have to, but because I want to. **It is specifically for the purpose of growing as a Christian, and dealing with the struggles and shortfalls in our lives.** *"Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?"* (Amos 3:3)

WHY ACCOUNTABILITY?

A common question men ask is why? **Being the independent creatures we are, the idea of "needing" other men in our lives does not sit too well with us.** You know the real reason the nation of Israel wandered in the desert for forty years? Because, even then, men refused to stop and ask for directions! Guys do not want to rely on anyone else for anything.

A couple of factors that keep men from developing close relationships are pride and fear. Do you ever have trouble admitting when you have made a mistake, or that you are wrong? I do. When we get into "vital" relationships with other men, it will ultimately require us to be vulnerable and transparent, and to admit that we have faults and problems. And that can be quite uncomfortable for most men. "I don't need anybody else!" Sound familiar? I spent most of my life believing that. But, time after time, the Bible shows that *"It is not good for the man to be alone."* (Genesis 2:18) I do not believe God was simply referring to a man's need for a wife. I believe He was stating our need for each other in general.

The Bible is filled with examples of vital relationships among the great men of God. Moses had Aaron. David had Jonathan. *"And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself."* (1 Samuel 18:3) David said *"I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women."* (2 Samuel 1:26) Paul had Silas, Timothy and Titus, to name a few. In fact, once Paul was led by God to witness at Troas, but he did not, because he would not go there alone: *"I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there."* (2 Cor. 2:12) Jesus had the twelve, and an even closer relationship with Peter,

James and John. **Do you see that all of the men God used to do great things had vital relationships with other men?** They recognized the need for each other. They did not try to go it alone. **Even Jesus, who was fully God and fully man, recognized the importance of vital relationships.**

One of the great benefits of accountability is that you will look at your life more closely than ever before. It will raise your awareness of things that, before, you did not think twice about. Eventually, your actions and behavior will change, as you share your struggles with other men, and pray about them together. You will often be relieved to discover you are not the only one who struggles in a certain area, and together you can learn to overcome it. This is where "iron sharpens iron."

HOW DO I FIND AN ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNER?

Begin by praying that God will reveal to you a guy or a few guys with whom you can explore the possibility of an accountability relationship. Start with the men in your small group or any ministry you may be involved in. (If you are not in a small group, get in one!) Participate in the men's ministry activities at your church. If there aren't any, talk with your pastor about starting a men's breakfast, or a basketball night or something that will bring men together in fellowship.

A good accountability partner candidate is:

- another guy; not a female - not even your wife. Am I saying you cannot be accountable to your wife, or any other female? No, of course not! You must be accountable to your wife (if you are married.) But there are some things you may not be able to talk about with your wife. Remember: **The purpose of these relationships is to help us reach our full potential as men of God.**
- someone you like, and enjoy spending time with.
- a peer; someone who is your "equal," and who is not impressed with you .
- someone you respect, and with whom you can build solid trust. Keep in mind that, over time, you will share many aspects of your life with this guy.

Dear brothers, I cannot say enough about the importance and benefits of developing vital relationships with a few other men. I can tell you this: **Once you try it, you will wonder why you waited so long to get started, and your life will never be the same.** You will not regret it!

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the day approaching." --Hebrews 10:25

All scripture quotations are taken from the NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (NIV) except as noted.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Pursuing Vital Relationships

Part Two - Play Ball!

by Jim Clayton

"Okay. I've found a guy, or couple of guys, that have (reluctantly) agreed to try this `accountability thing.' What do we do now?"

Let me remind you, right off the bat, that **accountability does not just happen. And it may not come quickly or easily.** It takes time, often a long time, to develop the relationship necessary for meaningful accountability. You may want to phase it in as you build the trust, and as you get comfortable opening up to each other. For instance, you may start by being accountable in "safe" areas, such as prayer and Bible study. More serious issues will come out as you get to know each other.

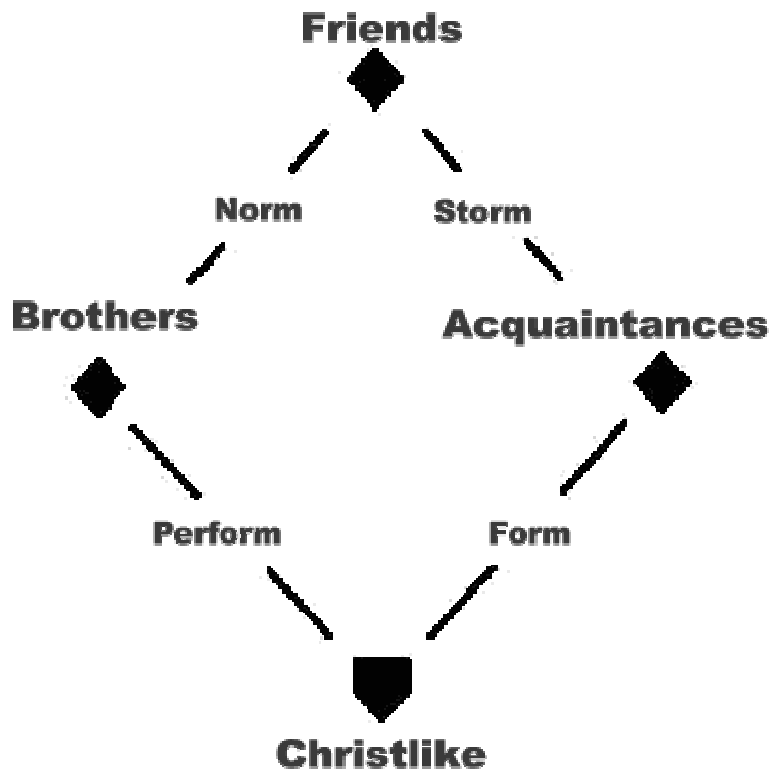
Perhaps the guys you have selected are close friends already. Congratulations! You are the one-in-ten men who has a close friend. Most of us do not. Not even Christian men. *"Most men could recruit six pallbearers for their funeral, but hardly anyone has a friend he can call at 2 a.m."* -- Patrick Morley.¹ For this article, I will assume that you do not know each other very well - yet.

Even if you have been friends a long time, remember that accountability is not automatic or even natural. **Vital relationship accountability comes almost exclusively from deliberate and intentional effort.** You have to go after it in order to achieve it.

What follows is not the "right way," or the only way to develop vital relationships. It is a compilation of ideas from my own, as well as others' experiences with accountability. What works for some may not work for others. **You must be open, flexible and patient.** . . . (Of course that eliminates most of us already!)

The Playing Field

At this point, I want to introduce the "The Baselines" from Promise Keepers.² It is useful in describing the relationship-building process. It is also helpful in understanding the development of small groups:



Obviously, the ultimate goal is to reach home: Christlikeness. But, just as in real baseball, you must "round the bases" to get there. You start out as acquaintances, develop a friendship, become brothers and, if all goes well, achieve Christlikeness. **This can be a long, slow process, with pitfalls and setbacks along the way.**

Before we go any further, let me restate the purpose and goal of accountability: **To reach our full potential as men of God, and to grow toward Christlikeness.** A better family life. Help with the issues of being a man in this world. Getting stronger in resisting temptation. Knowing that you do not have to face these struggles alone; that one or more men will stand beside you and support you, and encourage you, and pray for you. Striving together *"to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."* (Ephesians 4:23-24)

Heading for First Base - Acquaintances

First, you need to get to know each other. **FORM** the relationship. It sounds easy enough but, remember, we are talking about men here. "Football and the weather" will only take you so far. Here is a typical guy conversation that takes place thousands of times a day:

Joe: "Hey, man! What's up?"

Mike: "Not much. How you doin'?"

Joe: "Pretty good. How `bout those Bears?"

Mike: "Really!"

Joe: "Cold enough for ya?"

Mike: "Yeah! No kiddin'!"

Joe: "Well, see ya later!"

Mike: "Later, dude!"

Joe and Mike both walk away satisfied, having had a "great conversation," and some "male-bonding."

Men tend to be most comfortable when the conversation is light and we do not have to reveal anything "deep" about ourselves. And most men are much more task-oriented than relationship-oriented. We worry so much about getting from Point A to Point B, that we forget to enjoy the journey. Relationships often do not get the priority and attention they deserve.

So, **the first step is to just spend some time together.** Hang out. Have lunch. Talk on the phone. **Whatever it takes to get to know each other.** Do you enjoy each other's company? Do you have similar interests? Are you at similar stages of life? Are you the same level of spiritual maturity? *"But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend. . ."* (Psalm 55:13) In a way, it resembles the dating process. (I realize some of you married men may not remember what that was like. Let me refresh your memory - IT AIN'T EASY!) Developing any relationship takes an investment of time and effort. Be patient. *"But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."* (Rom 8:25)

Rounding Second - Friends

If you made it to First Base (Acquaintances), you are well on to friendship as you head toward second. This is where the **STORM** moves in. As in most relationships, inevitably conflicts will arise. After all, wouldn't it be boring if we all agreed on everything? Issues may surface as you get to know each other, and disagreements are part of the process. **Some adjustments in expectations and styles may have to be made.** This may involve a few "fair fights," which will help bring about a certain level of honesty and respect.³ However, if you are committed to the relationship, you will be able to work through these issues as they come up. *"Keep on loving each other as brothers."* (Hebrews 13:1) This will build the foundation and strengthen the bonds between you. Keep in mind that not everyone who gets to first base makes it to home. It is always possible that you may not want to pursue the relationship further. It happens. But at least you have developed a friendship.

I would love to give you some guidelines about how long it should take to reach each base, but the truth is I cannot. It depends on how well you know each other when you start, how often you meet, your personality types, and many other variables. Remember: **Enjoy the journey!** Do not expect the other guy(s) to be the same as you. Some of us open up easily (me, for instance), while many others, probably the majority of men, take a while to get comfortable enough to share anything personal. **Do not get discouraged if you feel like you are not progressing quickly enough.** It will most likely take a while to reach the point where you are comfortable revealing anything deeply personal to each other.

In the meantime, **begin to put some accountability in place, either informally or formally.** *"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."* (Ephesians 5:21) Informally, **you can follow up on things that were shared previously**, such as: "I'm having a hard time dealing with this person at work." The next time, you could ask: "How's it going with that person at work?" Formally, **you can develop a list of basic areas of accountability which you agree to discuss regularly.** In the beginning, these should be safe, non-threatening areas which will not pose a risk to the men in the group. They must be agreed upon unilaterally. Perhaps you begin with one or two things to which you are accountable. As you progress, you can add to the list, and eventually increase the level of openness and transparency.

Suggestions for Initial Areas of Accountability:

- Prayer life
- Bible reading/study time
- Integrity issues
- Spending time with the family
- Laziness
- Work issues
- Harboring anger or resentment
- Exercise, dieting
- Things shared previously

One of the benefits of accountability is that **often you will find that you are not the only one who struggles in a particular area.** Then, knowing you are not alone, you can help and encourage each other. *"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."* (James 5:16)

An additional benefit of accountability is that **you will have one or more men who are willing to listen as you talk about what is going on in your life.** Without judgment. Without the fear of gossip. With love. With acceptance. With patience. **And you will have the benefit of feedback and godly counsel from your brothers in Christ.** *"Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel."* (Proverbs 27:9)

ACCOUNTABILITY: Pursuing Vital Relationships

Part Three - Heading for Home!

by Jim Clayton

"The highest proof of true friendship is the intimacy that holds nothing back and admits the friend to share our inmost secrets." -- Andrew Murray

At this point, I will assume that you have one or more guys interested in some level of accountability, and hopefully you are getting comfortable with each other. As I mentioned in Part Two, the best thing you can do in the beginning is just get together and "hang out." Spend some time together. Talk. While that may seem simplistic, my experience has been that even just talking doesn't necessarily come naturally to us men. Get to know each other's backgrounds. Share some "history" with each other. I think you'll be surprised at the similarities in many areas, and you will begin to see that you are not alone in many areas of your life.

Going to Third - Brothers

As you develop your relationship with each other, you begin to experience the closeness of true friendship. Having weathered the "storms" on your way to Second, you now establish a new "norm" on your way to Third. "It's foundation is the mutual respect and complementary perspectives that have emerged during the storm. At this point the men can begin to learn from each other's strengths and can begin the processes leading to covenants and accountability to one another. They're brothers."⁽¹⁾

Now is the time to get serious about accountability. At this point you need to commit to regular meetings (if you haven't already), and there needs to be a "covenant of confidentiality" between the men in the group. That means nothing discussed in the group leaves the group. You don't discuss anything with your wife (if your married) or anyone else. For the group to be effective, each man needs to commit to both of these important points. That clears the way for more open and frank discussions.

You might want to use a study of some kind to facilitate discussions. I really like the Promise Keepers "Promise Builders" studies that are designed to be stand-alone topical studies that require no homework and are designed to create practical discussion.

Jim Dornan, in the book he co-wrote with John Maxwell, Becoming a Person of Influence, writes:

"Back when we were growing up, we heard a lot of stories about the [Niagara] falls and the daredevil stunts people used to pull--like Annie Edson Taylor's going over the falls in a barrel and things like that. One of the great legends of the town was French acrobat named Charles Blondin who lived from 1824 to 1897. He crossed over the entire width of the falls on a tightrope back in 1859. That must have taken nerves of steel since a fall certainly would have killed him. In fact he crossed the falls several times. He did it once with a wheelbarrow, another time blindfolded, and yet another time on stilts. They say he was quite remarkable. He continued performing even into his seventies.

One of the most incredible feats he performed was crossing the falls on a tightrope while carrying a man on his back. Can you imagine that? I guess just crossing over by himself wasn't tough enough for him! But as difficult as that feat must have been on Blondin, I can't help wondering how he got someone to go with him. That's what you call trust: to climb onto the back of a man who is going to walk more than half a mile on a rope suspended over one of the most powerful waterfalls in the world.

I used to think about that as a kid. What would it be like to see the falls from up on a rope above them? And more important, what person would trust me to carry him across the falls the way that man trusted Blondin?"

Ask yourself that question. What guy would trust you that much? What guy do you trust that much? Can you think of anybody? Most of us cannot. But that's our goal here. **To develop a relationship with one or more men with whom we can build that kind of trust.**

Here is a story right out of God's Word:

"Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.' So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up--one on one side, one on the other--so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword." -- Exodus 17:9-13

What a great story! When Moses got tired, Aaron and Hur stood by and held his hands up. What an awesome picture of brotherhood. That's what we need, guys. We need brothers who will stand by us and hold our hands up when we're too tired.

Don't try, or even expect, to immediately delve into the deepest, darkest corners of your lives. You can begin by having your brother(s) hold you accountable for things like praying regularly and integrity issues. As you see the benefit and results of this, you will also be building up trust, which is necessary for accountability in more personal and private areas.

But if you really want to be all that God wants you to be, I believe you eventually have to be held accountable for the areas of your life that are destroying your relationship with God. Those "secret sins" you'd rather not talk about. Some of us struggle with pornography. Some of us are having affairs, either sexual or emotional. Some of us are liars, cheats and thieves. But **NONE OF US ARE WITHOUT SOMETHING THAT DIMINISHES OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.** If you believe otherwise, than I'd guess that pride is one of the things you need to deal with. I'm being blunt here, but I can't sugar-coat this issue. My brothers, we need each other to deal with these things that are tearing us apart. We can't do it alone!

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." -- James 5:15-16

James is encouraging his brothers to hold each other accountable, and to pray for each other. **I sincerely believe that this is the only way we can reach our full potential for God.**

You know why geese fly in a "V" formation? Because the aerodynamics of the "V" formation enable the geese to fly over 70% further than if they fly alone. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an updraft for the bird behind it. When the bird in front gets tired (he's working the hardest), he moves back and another one takes the point. Do you see the analogy here? They can go a lot further if they

work together and help each other. In the same way, **WE can go a lot further spiritually, if we work together and help each other.**

Read what these four men did for their friend:

"Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on."

-- Mark 2:3-4

Do you have four friends who would do something like that for you? How about three? Maybe two? One? Sadly, most men do not even have one truly close friend.

Heading for Home - Christlikeness

As you build the relationship with your brother(s), and share your struggles and make yourself accountable to each other, you will experience a bonding and friendship like no other. It may not be easy, but it is worth it. Listen to what David says as he mourns the death of his brother Jonathan:

*"I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women."*

-- 2 Samuel 1:26

There is no magic formula or technique for developing the kind of relationships that we are seeking here. The best advice is to just get out there and do it. You'll learn what works and what doesn't. You might find that you don't click with a certain person. Don't worry about it. Try again.

Never forget that Christlikeness is a journey, not a destination. As long as we are human, we can never be totally like Christ. But, over time, we can become more like Christ than we used to be. We can move in the right direction. We can let go of that junk...that stuff that messes with our minds and hurts our relationship with God. As "iron sharpens iron," we can be changed...shaped...formed...molded by the Master into the man He wants us to be.

"Heavenly Father, please help me to set aside my fear, and my pride, and be accountable to my brothers in Christ. I know I can't make it alone. I need some brothers to stand with me. Please help me to develop some relationships with some men with whom I can share my struggles and to whom I can be accountable. I want to be your man, Lord. I want to be the man you want me to be. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen."

SAMPLE ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS

Regardless of the accountability questions you choose, the last question should be "Have you been truthful about everything we have discussed?" There will be times when that question is necessary, and true accountability demands it.

- Have you spent time with God on a regular basis?
- Have you compromised your integrity in any way?
- Has your thought life been pure?
- Have you committed any sexual sin?
- How much time did you spend in prayer this week?
- Did you pray for the others in this group?
- Did you put yourself in an awkward situation with a woman?
- What one sin plagued your walk with God this week?
- Did you accomplish your spiritual goals this week?
- Are you giving to the Lord's work financially?
- How have you demonstrated a servant's heart?
- Do you treat your peers and coworkers as people loved by God?
- What significant thing did you do for your wife and/or family?
- What was your biggest disappointment? How did you decide to handle it?
- What was your biggest joy? Did you thank God?
- What do you see as your number one need for next week?
- Are you satisfied with the time you spent with the Lord this week?
- Did you take time to show compassion for others in need?
- Did you control your tongue?
- What did you do this week to enhance your relationship with your spouse and/or child(ren)?
- Did you pray and read God's Word this week? What did you derive from this time?
- I what ways have you stepped out in faith since we last met?
- I what ways has God blessed you this week? And what disappointments consumed your thoughts this week?
- Did you look at a woman in the wrong way?
- How have you been tempted this week? How did you respond?
- How has your relationship with Christ been changing?
- Did you worship in church this week?
- Have you shared your faith this week? How?
- What are you wrestling with in your thought life?
- What have you done for someone else this week?
- Are the "visible" you and the "real" you consistent?