

Marion weekly update

SERMON January 21 “Accountability Given Accountability Received”

Hebrews 10:19-25, 1 John 1:9-10, John 8:3-11

This week we are considering something that many are asking to see more of yet many also don't want to receive it for themselves. We are looking at accountability. Accountability defined is simply being held or holding someone or something responsible. There are many ways this plays out in the world. For our purposes we're looking at it primarily in the context of relationships and sin.

One of the issues with accountability, particularly in the realm of faith, is that it can be an all or nothing thing. Either everyone needs to be held accountable or there is no accountability at all. Neither is particularly useful or helpful. Trying to hold everyone accountable would mean we did nothing else. Pointing out everyone's sin would be an all consuming, never ending job. It would also be obnoxious. No accountability would be a free for all with everyone pinballing their own directions. This was the condition of Israel at the end of the book of Judges and the result was chaos and spiritual destitution. Also problematic with accountability is inconsistency. Particularly when dealing with sin this the case. A handful of the current trends in what constitutes the sins that we really need to hammer on take the lead. All the other sin seems disregarded and ignored, particularly the ones most affecting those hammering home the judgement on those pet sins. Suddenly it's not accountability. It's judgement and victimizing. That rarely if ever is effective in bringing about change, and always ends up repelling the people we're supposed to be inviting.

Relational credibility is a key factor that creates all kinds of havoc. If we're going to hold someone accountable do we even have the relationship status to do it? Accountability can be a vulnerable, difficult moment and conversation. Do I have the background with someone to cross that boundary and insert myself into their life that way? Am I just pointing something out or am I available to walk the journey of change with them?

What is my purpose for the accountability? Am I offering it out of genuine love for someone, or am I just getting something off my chest? Am I doing it in grace and love or vindictively out of anger? Is it humble and helpful or am I the entitled, arrogant morality police?

Church can be one of the most hurtful places when it comes to this. There are the stories of prayer time in worship where someone has a “burden” for someone else in the congregation. They lift up so and so and ask for prayer for them to stop cheating on a spouse, cut back on drinking or any of a host of things that publicly put someone on display in their weakest moment under the guise of “Christian love”. Having ministered to youth for almost three decades there is an unsettling reality. While I don't think I've surveyed our youth here, I have surveyed more than I can count about whether or not they would feel comfortable sharing their struggles and sins in church. The answer is a resounding “no”. Why? Fear of judgment and being gossiped about. If this is the case the church is doing something very wrong.

This isn't Godly accountability if that's the net result.

Paul is actually very clear, as is Jesus, on what the initial steps of accountability are. They are going to someone individually, then with a couple witnesses PRIVATELY. Not exposing things publicly.

We're not supposed to be about public shaming. And we're not supposed to pick and choose which sins “actually matter”. There is a loving, concerned grace that should accompany any kind of accountability.

How we present ourselves also has a lot to do with how accountability will land. Once again we are in all or nothing land, Too often people of faith present on the far ends of reality. Some have a false depravity. “I'm the worst of the worst. I'm the sinner of sinners. Even the good I do is worthless”. The other side is presenting as having everything “all together”. My life is just peachy keen and I don't have a thing out of place. This is where the sense that we can't offer our faults openly comes from. All these folks come together on Sunday mornings and have their lives in check. How can I offer up that I'm not all together and a hot mess?

Point being that on one end the false depravity rings untrue to those who know us. “Look, I know you have work to do, we all do, but you aren’t that bad.” And so our credibility falls. And their concern is genuine that if I’m that unrealistically hard on myself how hard will I be on them? If I present as having everything just so I come off as being high and mighty. I have license to judge and that’s a fearful person to come to with a problem.

There are also barriers to receiving accountability. If I’m not taking care of myself in terms of mind, body, and spirit I may be too thin skinned to hear criticism. If I’m on certain medications or have unresolved trauma I may be unable to handle honest accountability. My background and baggage might put up walls. Regardless, if someone can’t deal with accountability there is a reason. Our response shouldn’t be to write them off. Patience and grace are essential to walk with someone through their situation. Which throws back to relational credibility.

Here is the basic of true accountability. It is taking responsibility or holding responsible for only what has happened. No more, no less. Anything other is false. And it either skates with not enough responsibility or being too harsh and stacking blame where there isn’t any. Either one misses the point of accountability. The point is to help change something that’s gone wrong. If we don’t acknowledge fully what went wrong we can’t change it. If it’s overbearing and more than is actual we’re trying to fix something that isn’t broken.

All of this said, there is a huge barrier to accountability functioning as it’s supposed to. Sadly people of faith are really good at using it. True accountability, that fosters change, has an added component. It’s responsibility for nothing more or less than is correct AND doesn’t impart shame.

Shame is a major tool for a lot of folks. “You should be ashamed of yourself!” If we make someone feel bad enough then they will change, which in spiritual terms is the word repent. This is so far off base. It also leads us to our scriptures.

There is a popular and correct notion that moves around social media from time to time. It says essentially that if we want to make sure someone doesn’t change or move beyond their mistakes is to keep reminding them of them. It’s hard to move past something that other people won’t move past themselves. Shame keeps people locked where they are, and if where they are is a mistake then they stay locked in the mistake. And if our way of trying to get them beyond it is to shame them we’re actually working against our own agenda.

Don’t mistake me, this doesn’t mean shame isn’t involved. I’ve felt shame as have all of us. Shame I feel internally is a motivating force to repent and change. But I don’t need someone else piling on more shame. I have enough going on already in my heart thank you. I don’t want to feel what I’m feeling and what I need isn’t someone driving me further into believing I’m garbage. What I need is partners helping me make the changes I already know I need to make.

Our whole message of salvation speaks to this. Jesus came to forgive and free us from guilt and shame. Hebrews tells us that He came to free us from guilty conscience. 1 John tells us that He is faithful and just to cleanse us from all unrighteousness if we simply confess. The point isn’t to dwell in the shame of what we do wrong. The point is to allow that natural sense of shame drive us to repentance and run into the arms of God. When we do this we are forgiven, freed, and allowed to become better tomorrow than who we are today. We’re not shackled down.

Note Jesus’ reaction to the sinners He came into contact with. He didn’t shame them. The religious folks did, but He didn’t. If any got pulled up on their shameful actions it was these religious folks that were harsh on judgement. Those that already knew they were living problematic lives? He was patient. He ate with them. He stood by their side.

The woman caught in adultery? He wasn’t the accuser. Everyone else was. He simply forgave her and asked her to “go and sin no more”. The woman at the well? He knew her past. He spoke it to her revealing his amazing knowledge. But he didn’t condemn her. Everyone else apparently had. But not Jesus. He knew that shaming her wasn’t the way to her heart. It was hearing and knowing her. And as a result she let herself know Him.

We don’t have to shame nor do we need to be shamed. Accountable? Yes. Shamed? No. Because every one of us is the same. As people of faith we are both saint and sinner. We love God and try to

live out that love as best we can. At the same time we all fall short and make mistakes. Jesus makes up the difference between the two. Just like He does it for us He does it for everyone else as well. Our job is to invite the rest of the world into relationship with Him. We do it best when it happens with the intentional understanding that we are in the same sinning boat as everyone else. And we also are in the wonderful saving boat of grace.

The life of faith is a life of tension. We both offer grace and need grace. Holding them in the proper balance lets us both take and offer accountability as properly as we can. In the end God makes up the difference.

BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 3

This chapter is often labelled as the calling of Samuel. Let's begin by separating this from our typical definition of "calling". We often see it as the Lord giving a specific role or task to someone in direct fashion. Moses, Jeremiah, many prophets were called directly. "Hey so and so, you're going to do/be this". Often this is met with resistance. "I'm not worthy." "I'm not equipped." In Jonah's case "I don't want to." Then they are persuaded and go about their calling.

This isn't that.

The only calling that happens is simply a word to get Samuel's attention. There is no specific mark when Samuel stopped being one thing and started being another. The story unfolds and over time it is "attested" that Samuel is a prophet. Others recognized his quality and faithfulness and imparted him into that role. Yes, God had that role in mind for him but it wasn't arrived at the same way as many others in scripture. In some ways this gives more credibility to his role. It's one thing for someone to proclaim their role and task. It's another for the masses to recognize it themselves. In those cases the proof has been established before the title, not the other way around.

We do well to remember this. Any role or title we hold, if it is to have any meaning, requires us to live into that role in a way that is authentic, faithful, and has integrity.

Samuel is replacing Eli and company as the spiritual lead in Israel. The chapter begins with several passages that may have double intention. There is the physical reality and the spiritual reality. Opening up the spiritual reality of Israel and the spiritual leaders is that receiving visions or a word from the Lord had dwindled. In fact it seems the only word from the Lord Eli received that we know of came from another man of God prophesying his family's demise.

Why would the word dwindle? Think about the state of Israel. They were in chaos and spiritually destitute. Have you ever tried to help someone over and over again only to be rejected? Have you decided then to pull back from them because you realized it was just wasted energy? It doesn't mean you're not interested or caring. It just means that interventions are pointless...until they aren't. Thus Samuel.

Signs of this transition coming lie in simple things like where Eli and Samuel were lying to rest. Eli was in his "usual place" which we surmise is distant from the Ark. Samuel is lying very near to it, observing his ministerial duties making sure the lamp in the tabernacle stayed lit and didn't go out. In addition to being physical location, it lets us know that Samuel is closer to God than Eli spiritually.

The lamp not having gone out let's us know that the timing of this was likely early morning hours. The flame would likely be dwindling. Samuel's job would have been to put more oil into it to get it going brightly again. Spiritually the prophetic word had become few and far between in Israel, and certainly absent with Eli and sons. Dwindled, yes, out no. Who would reignite it? Samuel.

Where God begins calling Samuel begins what is known more as a theophany than a calling. Theophany is simply a story of God appearing in the world. In this moment God is actively jumping in and starting something new in Samuel. The task isn't specific, nor the role specified. What is clear is that communication lines are reopened and they are reopened in Samuel. Sometimes this is how it works with us. We want a clear moment in time and a voice tasking us. It might be a slow burn of development as it is here. It begins with a beckoning, but what follows is Samuel's maturing and feeling his way through this new experience communing with God. The end product is the prophet.

Some might find it odd that scripture says that Samuel did “not yet know the Lord.” This is a wonderfully practical and understandably human sense of the story. We like to think our heroes had a charmed faith past, a clear calling, and moved into that calling with grace, power, and success. This sounds more like fumbling around, quite literally, in the dark. Why wouldn’t Samuel have “known the Lord”?

Clearly Samuel knew of the Lord. He served the Lord under Eli. How much he knew is debatable. The condition of his heart given this engagement with God is not. He was ready and willing to serve. But truly knowing the Lord? Understanding the revealed word of God? How could he? He had no reference point. Eli hadn’t received any word or vision so how could he fully teach Samuel? Moreover why would he if he’d become complacent in his role and in not hearing God’s voice? Samuel can’t be held responsible for what he’d never been taught. And that’s okay as we see his story unfold.

Think about people you’ve known with expertise in an area you know nothing about. For me, outside of “could you tell me what you do?” there’s not a lot of questions I have the experience or words to form. Where an expert chef might walk into a kitchen and immediately spot all kinds of good point and bad points in the set up and operation, those of us without the schooling and experience simply walk in wondering where the fridge is to get a soda. This is fine. It’s also why we need people willing to shepherd us in new roles. Samuel didn’t have this full benefit in Eli.

There is a very real sense of “if you don’t use it you lose it” here as well. We need to stay tuned into God because if we don’t, even if God decides to speak, we may not hear God’s voice. This is Eli. It took him three times being woken to recognize what was going on. Spiritual muscles atrophy just like physical ones. It doesn’t just happen to clergy or back then and not now. All of us need to remember that a relationship with God is like any other. It takes work and intention to stay connected. The further we drift away from those disciplines, experiences, and people that keep us tied into our faith the weaker that connection is likely to become.

Finally Samuel answers and immediately what had been lost is reinstated. The Lord STOOD there and SPOKE. Vision and word of the Lord are back! Be mindful. We never know what God might be ready to do through us if we just pay attention and answer a summons. In this case it was working to right the ship of Israel.

God speaks right to Samuel. Once again, this isn’t a call to a role or a task. It’s just an announcement. The “tingling ears” are short and long term. When this word of the Lord is fulfilled about Eli, certainly ears will tingle. Don’t think there wasn’t a gossip mill back then just like there is now. Any piece of juicy news travels fast. I would imagine it would be particularly so in this instance. The complacent Eli who did nothing to correct the ritual practices in Shiloh would be gone. His thieving, debaucherous sons would be gone. Removing the corruption and apathy from such a holy place would be big news indeed.

Samuel would then go on to prophesy over Israel for his lifetime. His reliable word from the Lord would tingle ears aplenty. For those who wanted to hear from and follow God they would tingle with joy. For those who wanted to go their own way and ignore God, they would tingle with discomfort. The prophecy itself is shortened from chapter 2. It’s not about Eli. It’s about Samuel. We already know where Eli’s house is bound. This is showing us to and through whom God has decided to communicate. Before Israel gets a king they will get a prophet.

When morning comes Eli summons Samuel. Imagine the trepidation. The man who has raised you and with whom you’ve ministered to the Lord asks you what has been revealed. It’s horrible news. We don’t know if Samuel knew that Eli had already heard this prophecy some time prior. If not, it’s even moreso difficult thinking that, not even being grown, he’d have to hold this “man of God” accountable. Certainly Eli could see his fear. How could he not? It’s fairly easy to pick up on someone shaking in their shoes.

Whatever we might say about Eli’s past, this present moment we can compliment him. He must have replied softly and gently enough to put Samuel at ease. Remember, this isn’t a seasoned prophet Samuel confident to confront a king. This is Samuel, still considered a boy and disoriented by this first

encounter with the Lord. Eli wants to know and helps Samuel find the courage to speak honest and forthright.

Another lesson we can all learn and be reminded of. Just because I want something doesn't mean I can demand it. It surely doesn't mean that trying to force someone to divulge anything is going to yield a positive result. Instead we must regard the other person's position, state of mind and heart, and place in our lives. We don't do this to manipulate our way. We do it out of respect and love for one another. The assurance of safety is significant when we are tackling difficult topics and circumstances. Patience and gentleness succeed where haste and aggression fail.

Eli's response is one of integrity. Not railing against the messenger he knows the message is true. At least for the moment he remembers his place before God and that God's justice is correct and absolute. At the very least, like the employee caught by the boss with their hand in the till, the only honest response is resignation to whatever consequence follows.

The chapter ends pushing us through Samuel's growing up in a few short verses. That his words never "fell to the ground" lets us know that Samuel would be true to the Lord. Keep in mind that the prophet doesn't speak as God. They receive a word and then communicate it to the people. Not all prophets did that reliably. Think about all the prophets around the kings as the nation of Israel moves forward. There was no shortage of "prophets" twisting God's word to tickle the ears of the kings. They were unreliable. The prophets on the fringe were the ones pushed there because they dared be honest with God's word. Most kings chose to believe the false word over the true.

Samuel spoke the truth.

As we discussed with the passing of Eli's house spreading through Israel because it was a big deal so as Samuel grew would his name spread. Rather than the dishonest men who had no word from the Lord, now there would be man of integrity through whom God would speak. What a refreshing reality! And so it was "attested" that he was a prophet. We end as the chapter began. It began with the word of the Lord and visions being rare to almost gone. Now the Lord continues to "appear at Shiloh" (vision), and reveal Godself to Samuel through God's word.

I was once told that whatever we do if we follow a heel anything we do will make us look like a hero and if we follow a hero it will be hard to not look like a heel. Samuel is no doubt a hero. Whatever we do, whether we follow hero or heel, if we do it with God and to our best, hopefully we'll be a hero accomplishing God's word.