

Accountability in Scripture

When someone enters the assembly, claiming to be Christian, standing members examine the person's testimony to see if it is either true or false. In a sense, they are seeking an *accountability* for the claim to Christianity. "Do you know this person?" is usually asked. "Was he baptized?"

Unless that person's life is blatantly hypocritical, we have no right to determine the validity of a person's confession of faith. Even Judas Iscariot was admitted into Jesus' fold on the basis of testimony and not by trial from the other members. Only when deeds become evident should we call people into account and seek to dis-fellowship them, if that is the medicine needed.

That being said, it goes different with God, for He is the Judge of our heart. In Jesus' story of the king who demanded an accounting from his servants, he tells the wicked servant, "I will judge you by your own words!" (Luke 19:22) In what we say, we will be held accountable. Jesus said, "Men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matt 12:36-37)

The long and the short of accountability is this: we are held accountable *to* each other and *for* each other. The mechanics of how this is done is explained in scripture. In the end, our 'account books' will be audited by Christ the Judge.

Old Testament Examples

The ancients were skeptical of a "final" judgment, as seen in Solomon's observations:

In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness. (Eccl 7:15)

There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. (Eccl 8:14)

That the Jews held a fleshly view of God is seen in the OT. When the Lord revealed the 70 elders hiding inside of a wall and worshipping idols, the elders were saying: "The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land." (Ezek 8:12) They thought God was like man. As long as we hide our deeds, He won't find out. Besides, they said, God has left town. He doesn't care.

But God had not forgotten, and He wasn't going to let Israel off the hook. He sent in the Assyrians and the Babylonians to teach His people that they would be judged for their sin.

Israel's idolatry was a national sin. Yet the story of David's adultery and murder is a poignant illustration of how God also deals with personal sin. Nathan revealed to David that God knew all the gritty details between him and Bathsheba. In shame and repentance David cries out, "I have

sinned!” Nathan replies, “The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die.” (2 Sam 12:13-15)

If God had not forgiven him, David would have died. Nathan says, “God has removed your sin. Therefore, you won’t die.” It would have been contrary for God to forgive David on earth, and then condemn him for the same crimes on Judgment Day.

This is a tricky area, for accountability *always* necessitates judgment. It would do no good to hold a man on trial and then not pass sentence. David didn’t get off the hook. Nathan went on to say, “because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die.”

In other words, God says, “Since you publicly and openly shamed My Holy Name in front of the heathen nations, an innocent child will pay for *your* sins with *his* blood.” It is a metaphor for Christ’s sacrifice for all of us.

Christ paid the penalty for all of our sins. David’s confession and repentance speaks to us today. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) But like David, we may not get completely off the hook.

Let’s suppose you robbed the local gas station. Later, after realizing your error, you cry out to God, “Father! Please forgive me for robbing the gas station!” God forgives you, but you’ve still got a sack full of stolen cash. What do you do with the money? You could bury it, but what would Christ prefer you do? Keeping the money would not be true repentance, so you return the money to the gas station. Will you have to suffer consequences? Of course! You could plead to the judge, “Your honor, God forgave me for my sin, so please forgive me also!”

The point is this: there is always some kind of recompense for sin. Sin *must* be dealt with, one way or another; God doesn’t sweep it under the rug. The Christian’s sins were dealt with at the cross. Jesus is the “Lamb standing as if slain.” He is the Eternal Sacrifice. He is standing—working as the priest standing at the altar—but He is also the sacrifice, ever ready to forgive.

Accountability & Forgiveness

Someone may say, “I thought God forgave our sins. Why then must we give an account for them?” Indeed, Paul tells us, “Each of us will give an account of himself to God.” (Rom 14:12)

In another place, the apostle declares, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (2 Cor 5:10) If Christ truly forgave our sins, why should we be held accountable for them?

The issue is not whether God truly “forgives and forgets.” Speaking of the New Covenant, He says, “I will *forgive* their iniquity, and their sin I will *remember no more*.” (Heb 8:12) In Paul’s words, he is addressing Christians: “...*each of us*...” and, “...*we must all appear*...” The reason

for this ‘appearance’ before Christ’s Throne is made clear: *so that we are paid back for what we did on earth, whether good or bad.*

Most see their good deeds being piled on one side of the Judgment Scales, and the bad ones on the other side. Whichever side is heaviest will determine our eternal fate. This contradicts other teachings, specifically that of salvation by grace and not of works.

The issue of having to appear—*made manifest* in the Greek—and being recompensed, deals with reward, not whether or not we’re going to heaven or hell. Scripture is clear that there are those in heaven who are considered greater and lesser. Jesus spoke of “storing up treasure in heaven.” (Matt 6:19, 20) Paul spoke of “building on the foundation” with various principles, and those being “tested by fire.” (1 Cor 3:12-15) He says, “If what he has *built* (not his salvation) survives, he will receive his reward. If it (his deeds) is burned up, he will suffer loss; *he himself will be saved*, but only as one escaping through the flames.” Thus, there will be those who “did a lot of things” that didn’t survive God’s scrutiny and will enter heaven with “the clothes on their back,” so to speak. Others, who were rich toward God, will enter heaven with much treasure.

The Lamb and Judge

Since Jesus is the Judge, He developed the principles of accountability through parables. Therefore, it would profit us to study His teachings on the subject.

God’s purpose in sending Christ to the earth was to save mankind. “God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” (John 3:17) In other words, God did not send Christ into the world to hold it accountable. Jesus also affirmed, “If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, *I do not judge him*—I don’t hold him accountable—for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.” (John 12:47)

Christ’s *human* ministry dealt with salvation. However, at His resurrection and ascension, “all authority in heaven and on earth” was transferred to the Son. Jesus said that the Father had “given all judgment to the Son.” (John 5:22) So, although Christ had no authority *in the flesh* to judge, He later inherited “all power and authority” to do so later. God the Father gave Christ “authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man.” (John 5:27) On His heavenly throne then, Jesus Christ judges the world.

Our Lord makes a small clarification on the issue of judgment. “He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; *the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day.*” (John 12:48) This is evident in the book of Revelation, where Christ is portrayed as the Living Word sent to judge the world:

I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His eyes are flames of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, *and His name is called The Word of God.* (Rev 19:11-13)

Although this should terrify any sensible person, our culture scorns the words of Jesus as “nice sayings,” or just plain nonsense. Many will be those souls who, when seeing the bible laid out as the measuring stick, will be frantically trying to remember long past Sunday school lessons.

While a person is living and breathing, he or she has opportunity for salvation through the cross. The moment the heart stops beating and the spirit leaves the body however, there is only the Final Judgment. There is no more chance at redemption. Barnes observes an interesting point:

It is to be for the deeds of this life; not for what is done after death. People are not to be brought into judgment for what they do after they die. All beyond the grave is either reward or punishment; it is not probation. The destiny is to be settled forever by what is done in this world of probation.¹

Theoretically, a person—such as the Rich Man in Luke 16—could spend much time cursing God and Christ while in Hades waiting the Final Judgment. But it is the “deeds done in the body” that God seems concerned with, not what is thought and said after a person is in Hades.

Accountability and Understanding

Scripture has much to say about possessing the truth and thereby being more culpable. Jesus made this plain in several parables on the subject of accountability:

That slave who knew his master’s will and *did not get ready or act in accord with his will*, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. (Luke 12:47-48)

Although this scripture speaks to the Jews (who had the Law) and the Gentiles (who did not have it), there is application for us today. Two distinct groups are represented here: those who DO understand God’s will and those who do NOT understand His will. With the understanding comes the responsibility—accountability—for doing what God wants us to do. This is why teachers inherit a greater judgment: *they know the bible better than anyone else and therefore have a greater responsibility to obey its precepts*. (James 3:1)

Knowing God’s will—as in the case of a teacher—and not doing it, will result in “many lashes.” This fact doesn’t seem to deter many brethren in the church, as most would prefer to lead a bible class rather than lead singing.

Jesus is not teaching that those ignorant of the Gospel escape accountability. The context of His parable clearly speaks of God’s *people*—those who don’t apply what they know to be true, and those who sin in ignorance of His will. Paul addresses the issue of accountability and how it will be conducted. Note:

For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for it is not the

¹ Barnes’ Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:10

hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. (Rom 2:12-16)

The person in the “darkest jungle of Africa,” who never heard the Gospel, won’t be able to tell God, “I didn’t know it was wrong to murder.” All men have a conscience. This is why Paul says, “God will judge the *secrets* of men through Christ Jesus.”

Those who train their conscience into silence by sinning over and over again are not going to escape a future condemnation. This is why the bible will be the standard by which all will be judged, not what we think or believe. Our own heart can never reach the same standard as God’s. The law was added so that sin would be made more apparent. (Rom 5:20) While man may *think* there is nothing wrong with fornication, God’s word stands to condemn it outright.

Personal Accountability

God told Ezekiel, “The soul who sins is the one who will die.” (Ezek 18:20) This speaks to *personal* accountability. “The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him.” Ezekiel 18 boils down to a couple of essential truths:

1. Repentance will cause God to forget your sins.
2. Backsliding will cause God to forget your good.

Man’s angry reaction of this is summed up in verse 29: “The way of the Lord is not just.” Our culture thinks that “being good” is grounds for heaven. Yet because they reject Christ, any good deeds are despised in God’s eyes. “The way of the Lord is not just” in our culture’s way of thinking. As the Holy Spirit says,

How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. (Isa 64:5-6)

Mutual Accountability

Ezekiel also teaches that we are to be accountable *for* each other. The scripture needs little additional commentary:

I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, “O wicked man, you will

surely die,” and you do *not* speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, *and I will hold you accountable for his blood*. But if you *do* warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does *not* do so, he will die for his sin, *but you will have saved yourself*. (Ezek 33:7-9) (Emphasis mine.)

In New Testament Christianity, God is added as the intermediary. If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. (1 John 5:16) He goes on to say, don't pray for a brother whose sin “leads to death.”

Jude also says, “Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.” (Jude 22-23)

Those who care nothing for another human being, especially his own Christian brother or sister, will say nothing to warn them. Those who have a genuine spirit of love will hold one another accountable for their wrong-doing. Unfortunately, some in the church confuse “holding each other accountable” as “not minding your own business.”

“Am I My Brother's Keeper?”

In the story of Cain and Abel, we find the Lord asking some questions. Before the murder, God asks Cain to examine himself through introspection. “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?” In other words, “hold yourself accountable—examine yourself—what's going on inside of you?”

No answer is provided as to what Cain's response was, if any. But God provides him a way out by immediately telling him, “If you do what is right, you'll be accepted.” In other words, “Give me the same kind of sacrifice as your brother's, and I'll accept you.”

Apparently, having to “go to Abel's church” grated so much on Cain, that he chose to ignore God's warning: “If you do *not* do what is right, you'll suffer the consequences.” (Gen 4:7) God was telling Cain, “Sin is going to get you—get it under control.”

Secondly, God told Cain, “If you don't go to Abel's church, (so to speak) you are giving in to sin.” This speaks to James' words: Do what God wants you to do (*paraphrased*). Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. (James 4:7-8)

Many “resist the devil” and lose, and don't understand why. The reason they succumb to sin is that they refuse to “draw near to God.” They have no desire to submit to God, they ignore His advice, and ultimately become like Cain.

After the murder, God asks Cain, “Where's your brother?” Cain didn't know it, but he was standing before the Judgment Seat. God knew what had happened, just as He knew everything that had transpired in the Garden. “Where are you?” He asked Adam. (Though God knew where he was.) “Who told you that you were naked?” (Though He knew that also.) Finally, “Have you

eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” (He knew that they had.) By His questions, God was asking for an accounting for their actions.

God’s questions are designed to hold people accountable: Where? Who? Why? In Job’s case, God asked him many questions designed to interrogate wide gaps in his feeble human understanding. Once the questioning is done, God’s next step is righteous discernment. No more questions, but a solemn passing of judgment. Like the question posed to Cain, we are asked in scripture, “What have you done?”

Summary

In Jesus’ illustration of the Final Judgment (Matt 25:31ff), nations are divided into two groups: those who had love for others and those who did not. There is no prescription in love, and accountability is thereby removed. Any doctrine and church that teaches a different formula is self-condemned. The lack of concern for another’s welfare renders immediate judgment. In the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the rich man dies and is translated directly into torment. There is no question as to his actions and what they deserve.

No one likes to answer for sin. Like a child, we are shamed when caught, and become angry. “Why should you get in my business?” The answer lies in *agape* love—a love that hurts, a love that doesn’t demand something in return. It’s a love of concern, not borne out of self-righteousness or a “what-can-I-get-out-of-the-deal” attitude. Those who don’t “blow the trumpet,” as in Ezekiel’s case, display a lack of *agape* love—they don’t care about their brethren. Those who tell the watchman to “mind your own business” belong to the same group. Both may end up in Hell.

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