

*Among friends or within a special group,
confession and accountability are keys to
spiritual growth.*

COMING CLEAN

By Jan Johnson

IGNORED HELEN as she lingered by the door, obviously waiting to talk to me. I kept talking to another friend. Helen was a whiner, and I wasn't in the mood.

But as my husband, Greg, and I drove home, I felt convicted about cold-shouldering Helen. Why had I ignored her?

"I need to be accountable for how I treat Helen. I promise to pay attention to her next time."

Greg's smile showed his confidence in me and propelled me to the telephone book when I got home. I called her and we talked.

A few years ago, I would have felt guilty ignoring Helen but then forgotten it. But that's changed since I've started confessing my sins to other Christians and making myself accountable to them.

Still, confessing sin isn't easy, and Bible teachers don't offer many pointers. We do have this promise from God: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Here are some unexpected benefits I found that God built into confessing sin.

More Than 'Dumping'

Confessing sin can easily turn into simply dumping our problems on other people. It's important to also state definite goals of how we want to change. I learned this from a friend who listened to my confessions and routinely asked, "So, what are you going to do about it?"

This is the heart of accountability—

coming up with reasonable and practical steps to overcome sin. For example, another friend confessed that she was attracted to a married man. When I asked her what she was going to do about it, she said, "I have to stop fantasizing."

"Does that seem possible at the moment?" I asked.

She admitted it didn't.

"Why don't you substitute the fantasy with another activity?" I suggested. "Make it something that's related to the root cause of your fantasizing."

She figured out that the attraction was rooted in her marital troubles, which she and her husband were working on. I knew that she wanted to walk closer to God, so I suggested that when she was tempted to fantasize, she should substitute a thought adapted from Psalm 147:11: "God loves me and delights in me." She agreed to check in with me every other day.

Her fantasizing stopped—partly because her goal was so reachable. She didn't promise to stop fantasizing, only to refocus her thoughts. It also helped that she knew she had to report to someone—and that someone was praying for her.

Accountability's Surprises

Accountability unclutters the masked feelings from relationships. During the first four weeks of a new discipling

group, I discovered that I was jealous of how the other women were becoming close to Rosemary, my friend, whom I had asked to lead the group. Instead of just Rosemary and me chatting in her cozy brown corduroy chairs, three other women were now sitting across the room.

When I confessed this attitude and became accountable to her for a change, I realized that these three other women were delightful people whom I would love if I'd just give them a chance.

Instead of letting my sinful attitudes collect like dirty buildup, I can now find peace by confessing my grimy attitudes.

Confession and accountability blow away sin's "bogeyman" image. Secrecy is what makes our sin so overwhelming. Confessing sin demystifies it and empowers us to obey. Sin's "bogeyman" image hovers especially in those ugly feelings that Christians aren't supposed to have. In an eating-disorder group I led for two years at our church, Christian women shared these and other "heretical" feelings:

"God doesn't love me."

"My life is harder than other people's lives."

"Everyone was created equal, so I should have what others have."

We felt relieved as we confessed these to each other. Then we encouraged each other in God's truth: God loves us; he helps us; he provides everything we need.

Accountability foils long-standing faults. We all have faults that we've grown used to and haven't worked on. When I confess them, it helps me "face the music."

I did this once after discussing the problem of homelessness with a chiropractor friend. Since this was one of the few topics I knew more about than he did, I paraded all my knowledge before him at great length. When I realized that my know-it-all attitude had cropped up again, I felt disgusted with myself.

The next day, I saw him and admitted my fault. He was surprised, but then he

confessed to having a know-it-all attitude himself. (If you're bold enough to confess, other people often join in.) I work a lot harder on overcoming that fault now.

Accountability Blues

Even with all these benefits, accountability

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terrifies most of us. Here are some reasons why.

It feels terrible. The first few times I confessed a sin to someone, it felt as if a volcano were erupting inside me. Now, it's like the prick of a needle from the painkiller

I received after surgery. It's nothing compared to the tremendous relief that follows. After you get used to having a clean conscience, a "secret sin" hurts more than confession ever will.

I don't want to make a big deal out of every little sin. You may not have to. Being accountable to others is like "calling in the reinforcements" for more difficult, stubborn sins after you've confessed to God and still failed.

I'm already too hard on myself. We don't beat ourselves up over our sins. Our goal is to be like Brother Lawrence who "was very sensible to his faults, but not discouraged by them" (*The Practice of the Presence of God*).

It destroys our "Christian" image with others. Judgmental listeners will think less of you, but God often deals with that. Several years ago, I heard an embarrassed woman confess that she yelled at her daughter's teacher. I said nothing, but thought she was immature.

The next day, something occurred that made me want to make a testy telephone call to my son's teacher—and the principal—and the playground supervisor. I remembered that woman and thought, *There, but for the grace of God go I*. I prayed for her and vowed not to be so judgmental.

My confession can hurt other people. Some impressionable young Christians can be hurt or confused by our confessions. In a group setting, I often pull a mature person aside and talk to her privately.

When I've wronged people, I ask God to guide me in knowing whether I should confess directly to them or not. Sometimes I wait until I've worked through my problem so I don't burden them with something they can't do anything about. (Don't confuse confession with confrontation. Confessing sin is admitting what I've done wrong and committing myself to change.

WE ALL HAVE SINS *we've learned to live with. Confession helps me face the music.*

Confrontation is bringing another person's sin before him.)

I can't find anyone to confess to. Closeness isn't necessarily a prerequisite to confession. It's a spiritual exercise that requires a mature Christian listener, not a deep friendship.

I look for "safe" people who:

- act as a cheerleader, not an executioner;
- listen instead of play armchair psychologist or preacher;
- do not brush my faults off with, "Everybody does that now and then";
- believe in God's power to change me.

Getting Started

Here are the methods three people used to find "safe" people.

Look for honesty and faith. When Cindy discovered that her husband of 20 years had been secretly bisexual, she hated him. Cindy needed to confess this terrible feeling and promise to work on it, but she didn't know who could handle such shocking news.

She chose her Bible study leader, Martha, for two reasons. Martha seemed real. She often admitted her own shortcomings to the group. And, Martha prayed a lot. Cindy knew that Martha could help her lean on God's power.

Test the waters. Share something small, and see how people react. When Patty and I first became friends, she mentioned that she felt bad for yelling at her kids earlier that day. I didn't know it, but she was test-



ing me. I "passed" by empathizing and discussing ways to handle that problem.

Now we check in with each other to see how we're doing. We know we've found in each other someone who will understand, pray, and expect improvement from the other.

Recall previous comments. When Dave and his wife divorced, they disappeared from church. So Greg and I invited Dave for dinner, and he spilled his story and confessed his fault in the breakup. Dave told us that he knew we were "safe" because of a flip comment I'd made years ago. I'd said something about how Christians shouldn't take potshots at divorced friends who were already hurting.

All three of these people understood that Christian growth is too important to waste time being spiritual frauds with others. How much better to seek out "safe" listeners and point ourselves on a path of growth. ■

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