

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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