

Series: Great Expectations

What We Might Expect of Each Other in Community

Sunday Jan. 31 – a.m. session

Barry: Be imitators (Eph. 5)

Rob B.: Be genuine/authentic/vulnerable

Rob A.: Be accountable

Who *wants* to be “held accountable” towards becoming a genuine imitator of Jesus Christ? Not many of us!

It seems to me that it is another one of those bipolar religious ideas – like disciple making – we know we should do it – we even invite accountability – but we often don’t receive it very well, do we?

Who – though - *needs* this kind of accountability in their lives?
All of us!

You see – we are responsible to each other to be and do our part in the body of Christ, the church. Paul makes this clear in 1 Cor. 12 where he talks about one body with many parts.

We might remember phrases in 1 Cor. like, “The eye cannot say to the hands, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’”

Working together, being in service of one another, caring for each other – are all implicit in this metaphor. We need each other – and more - we need the help of each other to become more and more genuine imitators of Jesus Christ.

As one writer put it: “Sanctification is a community project.”

This is the main motivation for Christian accountability: to help each other grow in Christ-likeness.

It’s important – then – for each of us to have 2 or 3 folks in our lives who will gently push us towards our goal of becoming more and more like Jesus Christ. If we know, for instance - that someone is going to ask us, “Did you do that?” we’ll be way more inclined to do it.

For example – I knew a custodian in Ontario in one of the public schools where I taught. His name was David Mills. He was a solid Christian guy who – when he found out that I was trying to become a solid Christian guy – took to asking me - whenever he saw me - “What did you read today (in the bible)?” Initially, I found this gentle push a little bit pressuring and I even looked to avoid him sometimes – esp. when I hadn’t read anything that morning!

But over the course of time I came to learn a few things:

1. He wasn't asking me to make me feel bad. He was asking me because he wanted good things for me.
2. So - I started reading more and more.
3. Then I started looking for him to share what I'd read. And when I couldn't find him – I found myself a little bit disappointed for not being able to share.
4. And when I hadn't read anything – I'd ask him to share about what he read. That too became a gift to me.

I will never forget Dave – not because he put pressure on me – but because he cared enough to gently push me to become a better man of God.

I hope that you have a person or two or three like David in your life.

If you *don't* – I'd like to encourage you to do so. Here are some things that I'd look for...

1. Someone who is interested in growth – someone who craves Jesus and becoming like him – and shows evidence of this craving.
2. Someone who will be gracious with you. Someone who will listen well and without judgment.
3. Someone who will ask you the tough questions.
4. Someone who will challenge you – who will ask you, "What's next?" – and push you gently towards it.

Right now - I have 3 men in my life who crave Jesus, who listen well and are gracious with me, who ask me tough and sometimes uncomfortable questions, and who push me to become a better man of God.

These good friends are a key component of my discipleship – they are like iron on iron – making me a sharper man (to borrow the proverbial metaphor).

Perhaps now might be a good chance to handle some of the common objections to developing these kinds of friendships...

1. Nobody likes to call others on their sin. That's true – but a. that's only a part of it and b. calling them out should be more like agreeing with them about it – then reminding them that they are forgiven – then wondering with them, "What's next?"
2. It's too personal. Yep – but without vulnerability – there's little room for important things like love and mutual caring and growth.

3. I had a bad experience. O.K. I'm sorry to hear that but that doesn't make a good idea bad. Good friendships take time to find and make and keep. Perhaps what I'm challenging you to do this morning is to take an existing friendship to the next level – where trust between you already exists – to be slightly more intentional.

4. I don't need it. I go to church. I love my wife. I'm good to my kids and grandkids. Good! Keep it up! But may I challenge you to consider these texts:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds... (Heb. 10:24). Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently... Carry each other's burdens... (Gal. 6:1-2).

And then speaking to the believers in Corinth – Paul said: *I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are... competent to teach (Ro. 15:14).*

Should only pastors instruct us? Should only our wives restore us? Should only our husbands carry our burdens? Should only our children spur us onto good deeds?

It seems to me that the bible is making a plain case (in these verses and in others) to have friends in our lives who will hold us accountable to the way of Jesus Christ. Like all of the commands of Scripture – this one is not intended to make us feel badly about having these kinds of friends or not – it is intended (I should think) to help us become better men and women of faith.

If this is so – then how might we hold each other accountable?

I think this was summed up nicely in one of our Life Groups this past week when I heard Corey say, "Grace and Challenge."

1. Show Grace.

A. Listen well. And by that I mean this:

- a. listen attentively – posture towards the other person, eyes focused on them, cell phone off, minimize distractions.
- b. listen without interrupting.
- c. listen without interpreting – until you are asked to help your friend interpret what they are thinking or feeling or saying.
- d. restate what you heard - acknowledge content AND feelings.

For example – a friend might confess a personal struggle to you. Listen well and tell them what you heard: "You're frustrated. You feel like you've let God, others, and yourself down. It's very defeating. So, you've told yourself, 'Why bother even trying?'"

Restating like this lets your friend know that they've been heard AND understood.

Remember: *Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak... (Jas. 1:19).*

B. Don't judge. And by that I mean this:

- a. "You did what?!" – don't do that!
- b. Be mindful of your non-verbals – they tell anywhere from 80-90% of the story.
- c. Don't keep bringing up past confessions after they've been dealt with - as if to say, "See, you did it again!"
- d. Refrain from stock condemning phrases like, "You know better than that!" OR "What were you thinking?" OR "I'm disappointed in you."

Create a safe space in your friendship where anything can be said without anyone feeling judged.

Remember: *Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you* (Mt. 7:1-2).

2. Extend Challenge

A. Get past confession. Confession (which James says we ought to be doing with one another, ie. confess your sins to each other and pray for each other) is not the only point of accountability – to put our uneasy conscience to rest or to get something off our chest. This is good and therapeutic but – as one writer put it, "We must be careful that in our confession of sin we don't trivialize sin as something that resolves itself with mere sincerity."

As one pastor said, "One surefire way to ruin your accountability relationship is by making it 'a circle of cheap confession by which you obtain cheap peace for your troubled conscience'" – as if peace comes about by simply being honest about our sin.

After humble confession, we need to encourage each other with the assurance of the forgiveness promised in the gospel, and we should approach God's throne of grace in prayer together – claiming the forgiveness that is ours in Christ and then asking God for the wisdom and strength and softness of heart to make related, life-giving changes.

Then ask: "What's next?" For instance, "Why bother trying?" – because God is long-suffering and will work with you and on you until he comes back to get you – because you are worth it and they are worth the effort to make it better – because there is a better way than giving up: it is the road of perseverance and character formation."

B. Celebrate successes!

After developing a plan (maybe even together!) – remember and celebrate when you did that something you were aiming to do and didn't do that something you that you were aiming to stop. Thank Jesus for his protection and wisdom and strength in your inner being.

And by all means – say to your friend, "Well done. I'm proud of you!"

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Series Recap

Sunday Jan. 31 – p.m. session

Partners

One of the things that I alluded to when I talked about marriage was Dr. Eggerich's insight into a key *affect* difference between men and women.

In short – he suggests that: a woman needs to be loved by her husband and a man needs to be respected by his wife – that as critical as it is for a woman to feel loved by her husband – it is as critical for a man to be respected by his wife.

He roots this idea in his clinical observations and data – like this question (for men) in a national survey... "Even the best relationships sometimes have conflicts on day-to-day issues. In the middle of a conflict with my wife, I am more likely to be feeling:

- a. That my wife doesn't respect me right now
- b. That my wife doesn't love me right now."

Which answer do you think most men chose? Would you care to guess as to what percentage of those men chose it? A. 81.5% of the men chose "A."

Dr. Eggerichs also found root for his idea in the word of God – where it says: *...each one of you... must love his wife... and the wife must respect her husband* (Eph. 5:33).

Dr. Eggerich's shares this typical couple scenario to illustrate... Kelly wondered if her husband, Steve, would remember their 10th anniversary. Some years he had forgotten. But, this year, he remembered. He had found just the right card. When he handed it to her, she beamed from ear to ear/but when she read it, her countenance turned sour.

"It's not bad . . . for a birthday card," she scowled.

Steve stiffened at her anger. He meant well. What was written on the outside was great, but he had failed to read the inside

"Hey, an honest mistake. Give me a break."

"An honest mistake? You just don't care. You are so unloving!"

Now he was miffed. "Hey, give me a break."

"You buy me a birthday card on our 10th anniversary, and you expect me not to be upset? I'd rather you hadn't bought me any card at all!"

Feeling disrespected, he coldly said, "Fine. I'm going to the office."

Not good. But not far from better says Dr. Eggerichs. We just (just!) need to break this negative cycle by seeing underneath such conversations to the heart of our spouse.

Unfortunately, what often happens when we feel unloved or disrespected is that we start to predict and judge the other person's motive. Research, however, shows that successful couples don't make condemning judgments about the other; they choose to trust their mate's intentions.

Once a couple decides to see each other wanting good for the other (the reason they got married in the first place!), it changes their perspective and the filter through which they view their relationship.

So Kelly (though understandably hurt) could help her marriage by saying something like, "Thanks for remembering our anniversary. It means a lot to me that you even tried to get me a card – even if it is a birthday card. It's kinda funny, actually!"

And Steve could help his marriage by responding, "I can understand how getting you a birthday card on our anniversary would be hurtful to you. I'm sorry about that. I was excited that I actually remembered to get you a card! You know how forgetful I am!"

This kind of dialogue – Dr. Gottman points out – is more likely to happen after a 20 minute cool down period – when a couple can take some time to create some positive affect for the other based on believing in the other's goodwill towards them in general.

It's about giving each other the benefit of the doubt AND it's also about thoughtful reparation. What I mean by that is this: When we see the spirit of our spouse deflate – it is likely that we've said something that appears unloving or disrespectful.

So – here's the big takeaway: We'd help our marriages to go back and say something like, "Did I come across as unloving/disrespectful? I'm sorry. Would you forgive me?"

I alluded to this teaching in the series when I talked about mutual submission in our marriages. I encouraged the ladies to show respect to their husbands for the respectable things they do and I encouraged the men to love their wives like Christ loved the church.

LOVE and RESPECT.

Men – love your wives.

Women – respect your husbands.

And then – let's choose to believe in the good intentions of our spouses and seek forgiveness for when we don't love well or when we don't show respect.

Parents

I was sitting in my doctor's waiting room this past week (BTW: Is there a more aptly named room in the universe?!)

... I was sitting there with a mom and her three children – all under the age of three by my guess.

I pulled out my book to read it - but I couldn't help but overhear mom talking to her kids – one in particular. That child was on the ground and whining that her younger brother was bothering her (which he wasn't, really).

Mom was texting on her phone but managed to issue a stern warning to the child – which – believe it or not – escalated to mom picking her daughter up off the floor and plopping her down on a chair for some "time out."

The little girl cried and called out for her mom.

Her mom responded by saying something like, "I'm very frustrated with you. You haven't been listening to me all morning. You just need to sit there and calm down."

I – of course – with the luxury of a good sleep and some decent emotional detachment – wondered what might have been best parental practices for that moment.

And let me say this before I say anything else: I don't normally do this – sit somewhere and watch other parents interact with their kids and assess how they're doing – that's too judgmental and I don't know their story and I'm hardly a perfect parent with all of the answers! This was mostly an exercise for myself – a mental rehearsal for what I might do – even now with my own, older children.

Train a child in the way she should go... What training could have been done?

Some time ago – we (at CCC) talked about "Circle of Security Parenting."

I asked our folks to put their hands together at the wrists to form the letter C – like this! This represents the start and end points of a circle from which children go and come to explore their world: they go out from a "secure base" and coming back to a "safe haven."

We need to be the secure base that gives our children the sense of safety they need to step out onto the circle to explore the world. And then, of course, children soon need to return. So then we also need to be the safe haven they come to when they need connection. It's as if we're filling their emotional cup when they return. Once filled – they're ready for another trip around the circle!

Our relationship can grow stronger with each new round (as we fill their emotional cup) and let them go their way - and they can feel increasingly secure as we make it safe for them to come back to us.

I found myself wanting that for that little girl in the waiting room.

I was hoping that mom would let her come to her or that that mom would *go* to her – to show her little girl that even though mommy is frustrated – she still loves her little girl – that mommy is a “safe haven.”

I was hoping that that mom would train her child in the way of that circle of security.

In truth – I was also hoping that that mom would just get down on the ground with her child and play with her.

Now – that may just be the emotion of I’ve-just-recently-let-one-of-my-kids-go talking – or the you-only-have-’em-so-long-so-enjoy-them-while-you-have-’em talking – but I think it’s also that I’m learning a couple of things – that...

- a. I have to train something into my child if I’m going to expect them to apply it and...
- b. application is almost always progressive (in other words – children often aren’t fully obedient first-time responders – they respond in steps – and those steps are important to acknowledge).

Things were unraveling in the waiting room. I think there might have been a chance just before her daughter kicked her baby brother for mom to:

- a. go to the child and help her self-soothe
- b. validate her frustration
- c. help her solve the problem, ie. moving down one chair out of range of her baby brother.

It could have trained her how to problem solve. It could have taught her that feelings aren’t wrong but that they need to be managed. It could have trained her in a little bit of self-soothing.

Because misbehaviors are always opportunities for training.

Jackie and I have worked hard to train our children in effective communication. It’s a pretty strongly held value in our home. We don’t always get it right – nor do our kids – but there are often things to celebrate as we process the progress.

For instance, the other day – Cailey was rushing me down the stairs to get her to school a little earlier than normal. I got ready and headed out to the car. She was still inside. And then – she was still inside!

It's incredible the dark and judgmental things you can tell yourself at those times – like, "I'm out here – where are you?" OR "You put pressure on me to be ready and you're not even ready yourself?!" OR "I can't stand it when people waste my time!"

Now – I'm happy to report that I actually had none of those thoughts. I am learning!

Then Cailey burst out the door to tell me, "Dad – I've just forgotten something upstairs. I'll be right there."

I was super proud of her for communicating that. It gave me a reason for my waiting. It showed me that she knew me well enough that giving me that reason would be helpful to me.

We've had that talk (did that training) that is - to communicate in the in-betweens - while people are waiting – even if nothing new is going on - to tell people *that* – even to respond to emails or texts with one word like, "Thanks" to an email or a text that doesn't require a response but lets the sender know you got it.

So – I told her how much I appreciated her telling me why she had to go back into the house – cuz another thing I'm learning is that praise seems to work a whole lot better than criticism.

Train a child in the way he should go...