

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

***“Accountability and Priorities”***

Accountability is something that we have all had to be responsible for – whether in school, business or home. Balancing the checkbook, paying bills on time, making sure that your car is serviced and ok to drive, you name it. I am sure you all can come up with examples in your life. There will come a time when we will all be held accountable to Almighty God.

The first thing we need to do is to understand how the illustration that Jesus gave us today works. It looks as though the master in the story had himself been acting in a pretty underhanded manner. According to Mosaic Law, Jews were forbidden to lend money at interest, but many people got round this by lending in kind, or bartering, with oil and wheat being easy merchandises to use for this purpose. I am very familiar with this trend from my many years in radio – as companies would trade cars, trips, boats, dinners and their products for radio commercial airtime and promotions. They would giveaway a car, but there would be commercial after commercial that would say ‘go to XYX Ford, or Chevy, or Nissan – and we are giving away this car’ – you would go and fill out an entry blank and they would have a drawing. All of that free airtime was called bartering or trade promotion.

In this Gospel situation - it is highly likely that what the steward deducted from the bill was the interest that the master had been charging, with a higher rate on oil than on wheat. In the first instance with the olive oil – he cut the bill in half, so can you imagine what the master was getting in return? Like 200percent. The second instance was of the wheat. There was a higher rate on the oil than on the wheat. If he reduced the bill in each case to the principal, the simple amount that had been lent, the debtors would have been overjoyed, but the master couldn't make accusations against the steward without having to own up to his own unscrupulous business practices. And so, when the master heard about it, he could only commend the man's somewhat clever approach.

The first reading this morning from Amos talked about what was going on in Israel. Putting your hand on the scale to give it that extra little ‘charge’ and all of the other things that were taking place. These were the people who were supposed to be living their lives according to the Law, but they were really living their lives according to their pocketbook.

I think that the second thing for us to realize, is what this parable is really about. If we were faced with a first-century Jewish story we'd never seen or heard before, about a master and a steward, we would probably plug in the players were and what they were doing. The master is God; the steward is Israel. Israel is supposed to be God's caregiver – He gave them the Land, as we read about in Amos; its property-manager, the light of God's world, the apple of God's eye, responsible to God and put in charge of His possessions. But Israel – as we've seen in so much of the Gospel of Luke lately – has failed royally, and is under threat of being dismissed.

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So the question at hand is what should or could Israel do? The Pharisees' answer was to pull all of the regulations of the law and tradition even tighter, to try to make Israel more holy. More traditions, more things, more things to do. This was as we have seen example after example in the Gospel readings, had the effect that they were isolating and excluding the very people that Jesus was reaching out to. Not the hoi polloi that were working at the Temple but the normal people, the ones who worked the fields, the fishermen, the farmers, the regular people. Jesus, in this parable, is demonstrating that if Israel is facing a major crisis – the answer is to forget those extra bits and pieces of Law which the Pharisees have heaped up, all of the traditions that they enforced, and instead to build relationships, making friends and ease up on the pressure to the people.

That's what *'the people of this world'* would do, the regular people who were shrewd, actually the non-Jews, and *'the people of the light'* – that is, the Israelites. The Israelites were not isolated – for the Ishmaelites were all around them. The people of the light – the Israelites – they should be doing something like this as well, learning from some of the more crafty people of the world how to cope with the crisis that was coming upon their own generation. And so, instead of hoarding money and land, Jesus' advice to the Jews of His day was to use it, as far as you could, to make friends. This parable thus appears to be directed very specifically to the situation of the people who were there listening to Jesus.

We can learn from this as well, and how can this be translated into our world today? I want to suggest to you that it has nothing to do with praising sharp practice in business or personal finance. But instead, it suggests to us to pay less attention to the extra regulations which we enforce on one another. It is important that we frequently reassess what matters and what doesn't. The twentieth century saw the so-called 'mainline' churches in many parts of the world – the traditional denominations – go steadily into decline, with newer churches, in the Southern Cone – Africa and South America, growing and spreading. The 'new kids on the block.' We went out, the Europeans, the Americans went out as missionaries to try to get the Word to them, but today – they are going out and trying to get the Word back into our churches to get us back on track. That is why what you see in the world-wide Anglican church is a tremendous amount of churches from Africa, Sudan, and from South America. The Archbishop of Argentina as well as all of South America, the Archbishop Gregory Venables, an amazing man drawing these people together to stand and gather together in GAFCON. You have heard me talk about it and we have brochures in the back. The church we tried to build is now trying to get us back on track – some people are listening and some people aren't. What should the more traditional churches do when faced with their own mortality? Perhaps they should learn to think unconventionally, sort of like what Jesus was saying to the Jewish people, to be prepared to make new friends across traditional barriers, to throw caution to the wind and discover again, in the true fellowship of the gospel, a home that will last.

This week in Ridgecrest, North Carolina, something important is taking place. Your vestry has made a commitment to help support this organization. It is the New Wineskins Missionary Network and every three years they hold a conference at Ridgecrest – right near Billy Graham's

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organization. It is a 3-year Missions Conference. At this event, people from all over the world, mostly Anglicans, gather to learn from one another about what is happening as the Gospel is being spread, and more importantly, lived. Marilyn and I have been involved with New Wineskins since 2003, and I had been a member of their Board of Trustees, serving six years as the president of the board. When I came here 5 years ago, I was the president, and shortly after getting here – we had Sharon Steinmiller, who was the then Director, come and address us at the lectern, and then spoke to us in Chinese at the luncheon that we held for her. It was a fabulous event that gave us an indication, another view of what is going on in other parts of the world. I hold out hope that that when the next conference is held three years from now, we might get together a group of us from Saint Andrew's and get a van, or two – drive up to North Carolina and spend the three days together learning from Anglicans who are just like us from other parts of the world. I am praying for that, and I promise you that in three years if you come with us – it will be an incredible life changing experience.

What am I getting at, what was Jesus getting at? The key to all of this is about faithfulness. Money is not a possession, it's a trust: God entrusts property to people and expects it to be used to His glory and the welfare of His children, not for private glory or glamor. Heavenly riches will be given to us if we learn faithfulness here and now. What He entrusts to us – are we using faithfully? I would say that for St. Andrew's – YES, yes Lord, Yes, Lord, yes, yes Lord! Heavenly riches will be given to us if we learn faithfulness right here and right now. If we don't, we will find ourselves torn between two masters.

This situation was critical in Jesus' day. In first century Israel there was a very small number of very rich people and a very large number of the extremely poor. The rich included the chief priests, who lived in very extravagant homes. Just five years ago, Marilyn and I walked through the ruins, when we led the trip of nineteen people, just before coming here to meet y'all for the first time in July. We were led through ruins, and they had found Caiaphas' house. You want to talk about opulent in the first century, the tiled floors and walls, the fresco paintings, all in the ruins, but it was just magnificent. They were living, as we would put it, high on the hog. Kind of incredible. They lived in extravagant homes and so many comments on the rich by Jesus would include an attack on them. The Pharisees were more of a mainstream movement; and the danger they faced, with the Land as a key part of the Jewish religion and tradition, was that they would associate possession of land, and the wealth it brought, with a blessing from God. Jesus blatantly insists that God's standards are not just subtly different from human ones, but are the exact opposite. Jesus is saying something new in all this. But the Pharisees probably would have answered Him by pointing out that there was quite a lot in the Jewish law which encouraged people to think that possessions were a sign of God's favor. I want to suggest to you that Jesus takes the opposite view, with a good deal of the prophetic writings backing Him up, as you saw from Amos today; including the Law itself which commanded Israel to care for the poor and needy. How many times have we heard about caring for the widows and orphans. It is all about accountability and priorities.

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Please listen to Jesus' words that closed today's Gospel reading from Luke 16:13 in which He said, "*No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.*"

These words drive home His point about accountability and priorities, but you need to hear the next verse following the Gospel which read, "*The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.*"

And so I ask you, are you using all you have, whether it is a lot or a little, for God's glory and for His Kingdom?