

January 19, 2020

National Presbyterian Church

## Following Jesus: "Who's Accountable"

Luke 12:1-12, 35-59

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In our sermons through the winter we're looking at the story of Jesus through the eyes of one of the four accounts of Jesus in the Bible.

Some people ask me about the other ancient accounts of Jesus that have surfaced over the years and that go back to the first few centuries and ask: "*Why do we not look at these too?*" OR "*Wasn't it just a prejudiced group of men who chose some gospels and left out some others?*"

Well – (despite Dan Brown and the Da Vinci code!) that's not exactly how it happened.

First: the four canonical gospels are generally regarded by almost all scholars as the earliest accounts available – written closest to Jesus' time, and therefore the most reliable historically.

And then, second: the books we have in the New Testament part of the Bible are there not because a committee selected them *so much as* because they stood *the test of time and place*. That is, in the first three Christian centuries, Christians kept reading these books all over the Mediterranean world, so that by the time any church councils made any decisions about what God wanted as part of the Scripture, and about what was kept in or left out, the church as a whole had pretty much "*self-selected*" the books! So there was nothing much discuss (certainly true regarding the 4 Gospels).

So our focus is on one of these Gospel accounts (Luke's). Though even here (to cover the gospel within nine months and to coordinate with our Children's Curriculum) we miss a number of passages that we urge you to read (see [www.nationalpres.org/sites/default/files/Following%20Jesus%20Booklet%20Part%20II.pdf](http://www.nationalpres.org/sites/default/files/Following%20Jesus%20Booklet%20Part%20II.pdf)).

With this said, we come today to Luke 12 (half way through the whole Gospel), and to a number of teachings from Jesus that all fall into the realm of what I would call *responsibility* OR *accountability*, raising questions like:

- Are you an accountable person?
- To whom, primarily are you accountable?
- And why does it matter?

Let me start, though by thinking about three articles available on the web:

- The 1<sup>st</sup> is about effectiveness and accountability in business
- and the 2<sup>nd</sup>-two are about effectiveness and accountability in marriage.

The Business Article is from Forbes Magazine in December 2016 by author Brent Gleeson, and it begins like this:

"It may seem obvious, but accountability is probably the single most important element fueling truly successful organizations. Why is this? It's because accountability (*I have abbreviated his list*)

1. Defines the mission
2. Sets performance Indicators and Expectations
3. Ensures Ownership
4. Builds Trust
5. Breeds Excellence
6. Empowers the Team
7. Strengthens the culture
8. Achieves Common Goals

*www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2016/12/08/why-accountability-is-critical-for-achieving-winning-results/#311f048545e1*

And for each of these, Gleeson refers to an expert or book. One comment is as follows:

Competence and skill are *only a fraction* of the equation. . . Each person must be held fully accountable for their assigned tasks.

In reality, it's *responsibility along with specific expectations and duties* that lead to the collective success of the organization

Another (slightly edited)

Intense accountability is an integral part of avoiding group-think because it fosters the kind of constructive conflict within teams that prevents teams from merely being a safe hiding place from “growing realizations” that increasingly trouble us.

So when you're accountable – you speak up. Or, as pastor Kevin Thomson in another article puts it (linking business concepts to marriage):

When people become partners in a business, they bring together different strengths, abilities, and backgrounds -- believing they are better together than apart.

[DR: And their business is effective = they achieve *similar* goals, desires, and ambitions. . . when they each play their *different* parts fully]

This is the only way a partnership can work— whether in business . . .

OR (he says) in marriage.

Sadly (he adds), far too many people want to marry a partner, but instead, they marry a child. Far too many people pledged to be a partner, but they are acting like a dependent NOT shouldering Accountability or Responsibility

Edited from [www.kevinathompson.com/marry-partner/](http://www.kevinathompson.com/marry-partner/)

And a 2013 article in The Atlantic (abbreviated and edited) puts it like this:

**The Difference Between a Happy Marriage and a Miserable One comes down to one thing : . . Chores!**

Not sorting out the division of household responsibilities between working couples often results in ongoing resentment, and tension.

Determining who is responsible for various household tasks can be a particularly contentious process for couples . . . (DR: and so is often avoided) Yet, once done . . . this *sorting out of and obtaining clarity about responsibilities* in a home, can change happiness in marriages radically.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/saxes/archive/2013/03/the-difference-between-a-happy-marriage-and-miserable-one-chores/273615/>

And I suppose that for most of us *this message* is common sense (whether we practice it or not!).

But, having said that, the truth is that in contemporary society or popular culture these days, there's *another* powerful message out there that is increasingly loud, and that *at times carries the opposite message*: the message that *there's only one person to whom we are ultimately accountable. Not someone else – whether business colleagues or even spouse. But only ME:*

- This is *how I* feel
- This is what it means *for me* to be authentic (whether in politics or religion or sexuality or my identity)
- And who are you to say “boo?” and question *how I* feel?

In 2005 Notre Dame Professor, Christian Smith, for example, published the results of a study of about three thousand “20-yr-olds,” called “*Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*,” in which he saw this way of thinking leading to dramatic consequences

Here's one paragraph from what he writes (p.68). He says:

“The majority of those interviewed stated that -- nobody has any natural or general responsibility or obligation to help other people. Most of those interviewed said that -- it is nice if people help others, but that nobody has to. Taking care of other people in need is an individual's choice; if you want to do it good, if not -- that's up to you . . . even when pressed, about victims of natural disasters or political oppression, or about helpless people who are not responsible for their poverty or disabilities . . . “No,” they replied, “if someone wants to help then “good for that person,” but nobody has to.

In other words: no sense of general responsibility or accountability outside of “the self.” And yet, as we all know, this is not the whole story – not just from a business or marriage point of view, but even from the viewpoint of contemporary culture.

That is, while there certainly is this powerful movement in society towards individuality and towards THE “right-ness” (or righteousness) of *internal individual authority and personal autonomy*; and while this way of thinking *is increasingly common and is gaining momentum* . . . on the other hand, there's an equally powerful *societal movement* in the other direction: toward increasing individual accountability as well as corporate responsibility . . .

- whether in the face of mass killings
- or in the face of disasters in the environment
- or in the face of racial hatred
- or sexual assault

And the cry is increasingly loud:

- “Someone somewhere has an obligation to *DO SOMETHING!*”
- “Someone somewhere needs to act *RESPONSIBLY* and to be held *RESPONSIBLE!*”

OR as one weeping person cried out poignantly on a news report that I saw about sexual predator, Jeffrey Epstein:

*“It's not fair that death took him away before justice could be served -- before we had a chance to hold him accountable . . .*

In other words, paradoxically, in some cases, at least, relational responsibility and accountability are being demanded these days, and by some are held to be more important than any right to personal feeling and expression . . .

- whether it's Jeffrey Epstein's desire to do whatever he wanted to do

- or anyone else's desire (for that matter) to pursue whatever they think will lead to their *personal fulfillment or personal satisfaction, or personal happiness or personal authenticity*

**But where does this come from?**

This call that says we – or anyone – ought to be accountable or responsible?

- And who decides when “I” (and what I want to do) am at the center; or when “we” (with obligations outside ourselves) are at the center?
- And when do I follow *my own* individual passions or desires and center on ME?
- And when am I somehow responsible to abandon or sublimate those passions – strong and right though I may feel they are in the moment – for someone or something else?
- Is it just a matter of pragmatism? As the articles suggest? That is, do we only move out beyond ourselves and our feelings “when there’s evidence that it works” – when it’s good for business or marriage? Or the planet? But otherwise, we do what we like?
- OR – is there something deeper going on? – a deeper human impulse to be responsible or accountable living within us?

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Which, of course, is where the teaching of Jesus in our passage comes into the picture . . . because what Jesus teaches is that

- *You and I and how we feel* are not at the center of the universe;
- HE is at the center: whether we see him there or not, whether he seems close or not
- We are accountable to him (and therefore to one another) always
- We were made this way – to be accountable to him; in relationship with him, and therefore with others.

In other words, Jesus would say that this sense is part of the core of our being, even though it is often muffled and muted. This is what it means to be *Christianly Human*: to be . . .

- Accountable not only for our outward lives and actions *that societal laws can regulate*, but also for our inner lives – for our feelings and thoughts – *which no societal laws can govern*; inner lives that Jesus knows and sees straight through.
- Accountable, even when it’s hard; even when it goes against the prevailing culture; even when it looks as if we’ll be the losers not the winners; even when we’re persecuted, criticized, blamed, laughed at, rather than praised or blessed or prosperous.

And this is true, that we were made this way, not because he does not love us. But because he does. Because our small lives, and **what we do with them for him** matter.

What does Luke say? He says that God knows the number of hairs on our heads, and cares for us more than he cares for all the birds of the air

TO BE accountable and connected (as Kevin Thompson pointed out) is to want to be treated and to act as an adult and not just as a child

The late John Claypool told the story of a little boy who had been working for weeks on a Christmas surprise for his parents.

The day of the holiday open house at school arrived. And the boy went to school tingling with excitement, knowing that this would be the morning when he could finally give the handmade treasure – a pottery bowl – to his parents.

As his parents came down the hall to his classroom, the boy stood waiting in the open doorway, gift in hand.

Suddenly, unable to contain his excitement any longer, he rushed out of the room to meet them. On the way he stumbled and fell flat on his face on the hard tile floor. The fragile bowl broke into pieces.

Heartbroken, the child broke into tears. His father, realizing what had happened, rushed to the boy, taking him into his arms, and saying, “*It’s all right. It doesn’t matter.*” But the boy could not be consoled. He sobbed even harder.

It was his wise mother who got the picture, and reached over and took his hand saying, tenderly, saying: “Oh it does matter, doesn’t it? It matters very much. And the boy’s head nodded . . . you’ve grown so much – and you did it for us? To please us? The gift you worked so hard on – for US is broken, gone. But we know what you did; we saw it; we caught a glimpse: it was wonderful.

To say “It doesn’t matter” may at first blush sound like the loving thing to say, but it made the boy feel like a baby, and not the responsible, creative person, he was growing to be. In an unintended way the father’s words minimized the boy and his potential whereas his mother honored him. And this is what God does for us.

So let’s listen to our passage again:

Luke 13:12 when the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples,

“Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy.

<sup>2</sup>Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered,  
and nothing secret that will not become known.

<sup>3</sup>Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light,  
and what you have whispered behind closed doors  
will be proclaimed from the housetops.

In other words: “You’re accountable to God for your whole life: on the outside and the inside; for both actions and feelings; especially negative feelings of prejudice — racial, economic, educational; or pride; or jealousy; or inappropriate sexual thoughts.

It’s a struggle – outside and in: yours won’t necessarily be mine, or mine yours, but there will be some kind of a battle for all of us that we are responsible to fight. So Jesus says

<sup>4</sup>“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. <sup>5</sup>But **I will warn you whom to fear: fear him** who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

Be afraid! This responsibility business is tough. But then in the very next breath, Jesus says the opposite (“Do not be afraid”!) and brings comfort:

<sup>6</sup>Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight.

<sup>7</sup>But even the hairs of your head are all counted.

**Do not be afraid**; you are of more value than many sparrows.

We are accountable to God. And this is serious business, says Jesus: it’s a matter of heaven and hell; of eternal significance.

But at the same time, the one to whom we are accountable – who challenges us, is the one who loves us.

**And this pattern of comfort and challenging responsibility continues back and forth in what Jesus goes on to say . . .**

<sup>8</sup>“I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God;

(This acknowledgment is comforting)

<sup>9</sup>but whoever denies me before others  
will be denied before the angels of God.

(This is Tough Responsibility)

<sup>10</sup>And everyone who speaks a word against (me) the Son of Man will be forgiven;

(This mercy is comforting: God does not expect our perfection)

but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit

(This is serious!)

will not be forgiven.

(This is Tough Responsibility: whoever keeps resisting God’s inner prodding inside our lives, and who acknowledges no need of mercy, will not know mercy!)

<sup>11</sup>When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities,

(This is tough! There’s a battle of some kind going on for your soul)

do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; <sup>12</sup>for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.”

(This promised help is comforting in the battle)

And this battle is to continue whether we see Jesus or feel his closeness, or whether he seems “out of sight.” So Jesus says (in Luke 12:35)

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; <sup>36</sup>be like those who are waiting for their master (who is out of sight) to return from the wedding banquet,

And then at v. 40

<sup>40</sup>You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

And then v. 48

<sup>48</sup>From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Tough stuff. Held accountable to God and by God: Whether anyone else is looking or not; Whether others agree with us or not; Whether it’s easy or not.

YET . . . the one who holds us accountable is the One

- who gives us a part to play in his kingdom;
- and loves us enough to call us to be adults in our faith – not just children;
- and, then finally, who promises to us a reward.
  - Sometimes we see it on earth (these principles are practical and not just spiritual).
  - But whether we see the fruit of our responsibility on earth or not, Jesus assures us that we will see it in heaven.

Hang in there!

Play your part.

God will see you through.

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