



**The Reverend Mark Nestlehutt**  
**Christ Church – St. Michael’s Parish**  
*The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost*  
*and the Kirkin O’ the Tartans*  
**23 September 2007**

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*[It is always a pleasure to welcome the members of the St. Andrew’s Society for the annual “kirkin,” however; this year presents more of a challenge than in year’s past. See, the first Scottish joke that I was ever told by a member of the St. Andrew’s society went something like this: Q: Did you know that the Scots invented copper wire? A: Yes, two Scotsmen fighting over a penny. So, being given a Gospel passage about a wealthy landowner who is pleased to receive only a fraction of what was rightfully owed him by his debtors seems so anti-Scottish as to be inconceivable. Nevertheless, here goes...]*

In last Saturday’s *New York Times* there was an article on the novelist, some might say philosopher, Ayn\* Rand and her influence on many corporate CEOs of the last half-century. The impetus for the article was twofold: First, next month marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of her novel *Atlas Shrugged*; and second, next week Alan Greenspan—former chairman of the Federal Reserve and an Ayn Rand disciple—releases his memoir, *The Age of Turbulence*. Rand, who gave shape to the philosophy of “Objectivism,” argued that individuals have a right to live entirely for their own self-interest. She labeled those intellectuals who attacked her work and argued that individuals should also work in the service of others, “do-gooders.” What Rand tried to do was to offer a moral defense of capitalism. Ironically, when *Atlas Shrugged* was published in 1957, Rand was criticized from both ends of the spectrum: Conservatives felt she was promoting godlessness and Liberals felt she was promoting a message that “greed is good.” Nevertheless, the article noted that Alan Greenspan, along with many CEOs see in Rand a kindred spirit; a defense of their belief in the free market as well as in an uncompromising focus on personal success. Hers is a world in which reason and self-interest define all of life.

At first glance one might think that Ayn Rand would not have been particularly fond of Luke’s story or parable of the dishonest manager. The setting of the parable is a wealthy estate. The owner receives a report that his steward or manager has not been doing his job adequately and calls him to immediate account. The manager knows he is in trouble, but he doesn’t panic. He realizes that he is unfit for manual labor and too proud to beg, so he calls in those who have outstanding debts with his master and reduces the total amount of their debts, some by as much as 50%. His goal is to create enough good will, enough gratitude, that he has some friends when all is said and done and he is unemployed. But then the story takes an odd twist. Upon hearing what has happened, the wealthy owner commends the steward for his ingenuity—he actually is pleased by the steward’s behavior. All of a sudden it doesn’t matter that the manager is dishonest, what’s more important is that he’s shrewd. The parable ends here, but the author goes on to tell us that we are to learn from these shrewd individuals—we must use our wealth, handle our possessions, so as to gain and not lose our souls. In the story, the steward exchanges his wealth—or perhaps the wealth of his boss—for friendships. He realizes that once he loses his employment friends will become more important than money. As the author then discloses, true riches come from relationships and not from material possessions. In fact, the Gospel passage

ends by stating that it is impossible to serve God if one is most focused upon gaining wealth and personal possessions.

Now for those of us who thought of consumerism and materialism as late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomena, this passage reminds us that dealing with our money and possessions is an age-old problem. Yet, we Americans do have some unique challenges. Unlike the economy of Jesus' era, ours is global, yet particularly individualistic. From an early age we are encouraged to look out for our own interests because we are told that no one else will. And we often choose careers based upon what they will pay us. Even friendships can be determined on what others can do for us. It is not the philosophy of Objectivism that defines us so much as it is the economics of *Cost Benefit Analysis*. Here's an example of what I mean: Several years ago I was teaching a confirmation class to a group of girls at a boarding school and the topic was how being created in God's image informs the Church's stance against capital punishment. As we went around the circle, however, each girl stated that she was supportive of executing violent criminals, but then one girl spoke up. "I'm against capital punishment," she said. I beamed and asked her to say more. She then informed our group that studies show that it is much more expensive to execute criminals than it is to incarcerate them for life. *Cost Benefit Analysis*: it's the ethics of the day and we teach it from an early age.

Of course, we Episcopalians are far too proper and far too refined to admit to anything that sounds crass about our decision-making process. We Episcopalians aren't greedy. We are simply trying to take care of our families in the manner in which they have become accustomed. And we are not selfish, we are only after what we feel we rightfully deserve for our hard work and ingenuity. What psychologists and ethicists have been saying more recently, poets and authors have been telling us for centuries. That is simply how human beings are biologically hard-wired: to first and foremost pursue our own self-interests.

So, is Ayn Rand right? Is a world in which every individual pursues his or her own self-interest without concern for the interests of others the best model for humanity? Well, Luke's Gospel says no, and Matthew and Mark's Gospels agree as well. Yes, we must take care of ourselves, but we have to be concerned for others as well—the poor, the orphans, the widows—those who do not benefit from our connections, our education, our advantages. As those of you who are involved as a Talbot Mentor or as a CASA volunteer know, an African-American boy from a single-parent family, living paycheck-to-paycheck or on public assistance in Chester Park or St. Michaels or Easton is at risk to fail. Sure, he can pursue his own self-interest without any regard for others, but it might not be very pretty when his self-interest comes crashing into our world or when our world goes crashing into his, a la *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Christianity doesn't allow us to rationalize \$50,000,000 weekend houses and billion-dollar net worth's. Money cannot define who we are. If it does, then we will never feel any true connection to God, because in our minds the money makes us God; we have all the control we need in the world.

Speaking frankly, I think Ayn Rand is wrong and almost perfectly immoral in her defense of capitalism. But that's because I am both an optimist and a Christian. And the most radical act of faith for most Christians is to trust in God more than we trust in our own pocketbooks.

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\*According to the Ayn Rand Institute, "Ayn" rhymes with "mine."