

The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward (Luke 16.1–9): A Prudent Use of Mammon

DELBERT BURKETT

*Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Louisiana State University,
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70803, USA. Email: dburket@lsu.edu*

The parable of the unrighteous steward encouraged rich individuals outside the Christian community to use their wealth to make friends of Jesus' poor disciples, specifically by reducing their debts, so that in the eschatological kingdom Jesus' disciples would receive these benefactors into their eternal dwellings. It had its setting in the efforts of early Palestinian Christians to enlist the financial support of the wealthy. Since many of these did not wish to sell all their possessions and donate the proceeds to the Christian community, this parable suggested an alternative way that the rich could use their wealth to assist the community.

Keywords: parable, steward, mammon, community of goods, debt reduction

1. Introduction

Interpreters generally regard the story of the 'unrighteous steward' in Luke 16.1–9 as the most perplexing of the parables. It has received numerous treatments and a wide range of interpretations.¹ However, since critics have arrived at no consensus about its meaning, it remains enigmatic.

- 1 For surveys of interpretation and/or bibliography, see M. Krämer, *Das Rätsel der Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter, Lk 16,1–13: Auslegungsgeschichte—Umfang—Sinn* (Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 5; Zürich: PAS, 1972); W. S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (ATLA Bibliography Series 4; Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow and ATLA, 1979) 398–408; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (x–xxiv)* (AB 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 1102–4; D. J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1–13* (NovTSup 70; Leiden: Brill, 1992); A. J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 146–57, esp. 154–7; K. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 406–10; B. C. Dennert, 'Appendix: A Survey of the Interpretive History of the Parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1–9)', *From Judaism to Christianity: Tradition and Transition*

The present study attempts to illuminate this parable by taking an approach which differs from that of most previous studies. It seeks to set the parable within the context of the early Christian community where it circulated subsequent to the life of Jesus and prior to its inclusion in Luke's gospel. Most previous critics have interpreted the parable within the ministry of Jesus, within the context of Luke's gospel, within the context of the Greco-Roman world in general, or without reference to its context. Rarely, if ever, has anyone attempted to understand how the early Christian community prior to Luke would have read and interpreted this parable.

In keeping with that goal, this study makes no attempt to reconstruct a hypothetical 'original' version of the parable that Jesus might have spoken. Instead it interprets the text as Luke probably received it from prior tradition. Most previous critics, assuming that this parable goes back to Jesus, have stripped away one or more sentences from the end of it in order to reconstruct a more original version that originated with Jesus. While this procedure is legitimate, it has led to no certain results. Most critics agree that Luke 16.1–13 consists of a parable with appended sayings. One such saying occurs in 16.10–12 and another in 16.13. Both of these sayings could stand alone, and neither depends on the preceding parable for its meaning. They appear therefore to be related but independent sayings that someone attached to the parable.

Beyond this consensus concerning 16.10–13, no agreement exists on how much of 16.1–9 belonged to the hypothetical original parable. A few critics think that the original parable ended with 16.7, after the steward forgave the debts of his master's debtors.² Most think that it ended with 16.8a, after the master commended the steward for acting so prudently.³ Others think that it

(Leiden: Brill, 2010) 145–52; F. Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 439–42.

2 E.g. R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, rev. edn 1968) 175–6; J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 108–11, esp. 109.

3 E.g. D. O. Via Jr, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 156; L. J. Topel, 'On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Luke 16:1–13', *CBQ* 37 (1975) 216–27; R. H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 106–7; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1094–111, esp. 1105; J. S. Kloppenborg, 'The Dishonoured Master (Luke 16, 1–8a)', *Bib* 70 (1989) 474–95, esp. 475–6; W. R. G. Loader, 'Jesus and the Rogue in Luke 16,1–8a: The Parable of the Unjust Steward', *RB* 96 (1989) 518–32; D. M. Parrott, 'The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16.1–8a) and Luke's Special Parable Collection', *NTS* 37 (1991) 499–515; D. A. de Silva, 'The Parable of the Prudent Steward and its Lucan Context', *CTR* 6 (1993) 255–68, esp. 257; W. R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 235; D. Landry and B. May, 'Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1–8a)', *JBL* 119 (2000) 287–309, at 288–9; E. Reinmuth, 'Der beschuldigte

ended with 16.8b, the comment that ‘the sons of this age are more prudent than the sons of light in their own generation’.⁴ Many others think that the original form of the parable included the application in 16.9: ‘And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness so that when it is gone they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.’⁵

We need not consider this question further, since our interest lies not in the form of the parable that Jesus might have spoken, but in the form that circulated in early Christianity. For several reasons, it is likely that the parable, as it came to Luke from prior Christian tradition, included the application in v. 9. First, it is not likely that Luke composed 16.9 as an addition to the parable, since this verse shows no affinities with Luke’s style elsewhere and exhibits traditional features, such as the Aramaic term ‘mammon’ and the Semitic construction ‘mammon of unrighteousness’.⁶ Nor is it likely that v. 9 circulated as an independent saying that Luke added to the parable. Since it depends on v. 4 of the parable for its meaning, it is unlikely that it ever circulated apart from the parable.⁷ As the application of the parable that Luke inherited, Luke 16.9 has great significance

Verwalter (vom ungetreuen Haushalter) – Lk 16,1–8’, *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (ed. R. Zimmermann; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007) 634–46; Bovon, *Luke* 2, 444.

- 4 E.g. T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1937; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 290–3, esp. 292–3; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s, 1972²) 45–8, 181–2; I. J. du Plessis, ‘Philanthropy or Sarcasm? Another Look at the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1–13)’, *Neot* 24 (1990) 1–20, esp. 2, 12; M. Lee, ‘The Wasteful Steward’, *NBf* 78 (1997) 520–8, esp. 520–1; Hultgren, *Parables*, 146–57, esp. 147–8.
- 5 E.g. D. Fletcher, ‘The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?’, *JBL* 82 (1963) 15–30, esp. 19–20; F. E. Williams, ‘Is Almsgiving the Point of the “Unjust Steward”?’, *JBL* 83 (1964) 293–7, esp. 295, 296; R. H. Hiers, ‘Friends by Unrighteous Mammon: The Eschatological Proletariat (Luke 16:9)’, *JAAR* 38 (1970) 30–6, esp. 31–3; Krämer, *Rätsel*, 238–9; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 614–22; B. D. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and his Bible: Jesus’ Use of the Interpreted Scripture of his Time* (GNS 8; Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1984) 116–23; S. E. Porter, ‘The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13): Irony Is the Key’, *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (ed. D. J. A. Clines *et al.*; JSOTSup 87; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 127–53; D. Flusser, ‘The Parable of the Unjust Steward: Jesus’ Criticism of the Essenes’, *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Controversy Resolved* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 176–97, esp. 178, 192 n. 2; Ireland, *Stewardship*, 91–105; S. I. Wright, ‘Parables on Poverty and Riches (Luke 12:13–21; 16:1–13; 16:19–31)’, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables* (ed. R. N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 217–39, esp. 224–30; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 401–18, esp. 411–12.
- 6 Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1105; Bovon, *Luke* 2, 445. Contra Topel, ‘On the Injustice’, 220; Kloppenborg, ‘Dishonoured Master’, 475.
- 7 Contra Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 77, 81, 176.

for understanding how the pre-Lukan Christian community read and interpreted this parable.

We will consider four aspects of this parable: the parable proper in Luke 16.1–8, its application in 16.9, its socio-historical setting in the context of the early Christian community, and its interpretation as an extended metaphor.

2. The Parable Proper (Luke 16.1–8)

The parable proper (Luke 16.1–8) develops in four steps: an account of the steward's problem (16.1–2), a soliloquy in which he comes up with a solution (16.3–4), a description of how he implements the solution (16.5–7) and an evaluation of his actions (16.8).

The steward's problem is that he has been fired from his job (16.1–2). He has been working as the steward or manager of 'a certain rich man', who presumably owned an estate. The manager of such an estate would often be a household slave, but in this case the steward seems to be a salaried employee, since after his dismissal he is free to go where he wishes.⁸ In the story, the steward is accused of squandering the rich man's possessions. Since the story does not say who made the accusation, this question has no relevance for its interpretation.⁹ Some critics imagine that the accusation was false.¹⁰ However, since the steward never protests his innocence, it is likely that the charges were accurate.¹¹ As a result, the master asks him to turn in the record of his stewardship, informing him that he will no longer serve in that capacity.

In the next part of the story, the steward comes up with a solution to his problem (16.3–4). In a soliloquy, he first identifies the problem: 'What shall I do? Because my master is taking the stewardship away from me.' He then rejects two potential solutions as unsatisfactory: 'I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg.' Finally he comes up with the answer: 'I know what I will do, so that when I am removed from the stewardship they will receive me into their houses.' At this point, the story does not indicate what the steward plans to do but says only that his goal is to be received into the houses of some unnamed benefactors.¹²

8 Manson, *Sayings*, 291; Via, *Parables*, 157; Herzog, *Parables*, 241; Hultgren, *Parables*, 149; J. A. Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth in Luke's Travel Narrative* (BibInt; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 115; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 406. M. A. Beavis thinks that the steward was a slave ('Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–8)', *JBL* 111 (1992) 37–54, esp. 45, 49).

9 Thus nothing suggests that the master's debtors made the accusation (contra Herzog, *Parables*, 251–5).

10 Beavis, 'Ancient Slavery', 48–9; Wright, 'Parables', 224.

11 Marshall, *Luke*, 617; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1097.

12 The view that the steward's goal was to retain his stewardship (Herzog, *Parables*, 256) is contradicted by the steward's own soliloquy.

The third part of the story describes how the steward carries out his plan (16.5–7). He summons each of his master's debtors and reduces their debts. Apparently at this point, the steward has not yet turned in the record of his stewardship and thus still has the ability to act as if he were authorised by his master. The story gives two examples of debts that he reduces: a debt of a hundred jars of olive oil reduced to fifty, and a debt of a hundred measures of wheat reduced to eighty. The size of these debts precludes us from identifying the debtors as poor peasants or small-scale merchants.¹³ The debtors themselves must have a measure of wealth if they are to receive the steward into their houses.

At this point, the nature of the plan becomes clear. By reducing the debts of his master's debtors, the steward hopes to make them friendly towards himself so that they will 'receive' him 'into their houses'. Presumably this means that one or more of them will employ him in the service of their households.¹⁴ Before he turns in the account of his stewardship, the steward uses his master's finances to make friends so that they will give him a new job.

The fourth part of the story gives an evaluation of the steward's actions: 'And the master (or lord) commended the steward of unrighteousness because he acted prudently' (Luke 16.8a). While the master commends the steward's prudence, nothing in the text suggests that he reinstates him.¹⁵ The success of the plan would result in the steward having a new position with the master's debtors.

Interpreters have given three different explanations as to why the narrator here designates the steward as a 'steward of unrighteousness'.¹⁶ First, he may have acted unjustly from the beginning in managing his master's estate.¹⁷ Second, he may have acted unjustly in reducing the debts of his master's debtors.¹⁸ Against this view is the fact that the master commends the steward for his actions. Third, he may be a 'steward of unrighteousness' not because of any specific impropriety but because he is one of 'the sons of this age' and not one of 'the sons of light' (16.8b).¹⁹ Likewise in 16.9, money may be termed 'the mammon of unrighteousness', not because it is gained through dishonesty, but because, as a feature of the present evil age, it belongs to the sphere of unrighteousness. Both the first and third explanations probably apply here.

Most critics agree, probably correctly, that the term 'lord' in 16.8a refers to the steward's master, as it does in vv. 3 and 5. Jeremias and others took the view that it

13 Fletcher, 'Riddle', 23; Kloppenborg, 'Dishonoured Master', 482; Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth*, 118–19.

14 Wright, 'Parables', 226.

15 Contra de Silva, 'Parable of the Prudent Steward', 264; Herzog, *Parables*, 255–7; Beavis, 'Ancient Slavery', 51–2.

16 Ireland, *Stewardship*, 68–72.

17 Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1097; Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth*, 123.

18 Stein, *Introduction to the Parables*, 109; Ireland, *Stewardship*, 74.

19 H. Kosmala, 'The Parable of the Unjust Steward in the Light of Qumran', *ASTI* 3 (1964) 114–21.

refers to Jesus, as it does in another parable (Luke 18.8).²⁰ Other critics emphasise the ambiguity of the term.²¹

The central question is why the master would commend the actions of his steward. Traditionally, exegetes have distinguished between the steward's dishonesty and his prudence: the master commends him for the latter, not the former. This interpretation is accurate as far as it goes, but it does not explain why the master would commend him for a prudent action if this action were also ethically dubious.

Critics disagree on whether the master commended behaviour that was contrary to his own interests. According to one theory, the steward eliminated his own commission and therefore did not cause any financial loss to his master.²² According to another, the steward eliminated the hidden interest in the debt, understood as unlawful usury, thus diminishing his master's profit.²³ Both theories have been justly criticized.²⁴

Others think that the master admired the steward as a sly rogue despite the fact that the master suffered financially through the steward's actions.²⁵ John S. Kloppenborg suggests that the master lost honour from the steward's actions but praised the steward anyway and thus freed himself from the social code of honour and shame.²⁶ Landry and May think that the steward restored the master's lost honour, thus providing a benefit to the master that outweighed his monetary loss.²⁷ Parrott thinks that the master's words should be translated as a question implying that the master did not commend the steward.²⁸

The most satisfactory explanation is that given by John K. Goodrich.²⁹ He has shown that Roman landowners not infrequently reduced the debts of their tenants

20 Jeremias, *Parables*, 45–7. Ireland lists others with this view (*Stewardship*, 60 n. 53).

21 R. S. Schellenberg, 'Which Master? Whose Steward? Metalepsis and Lordship in the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Lk. 16.1–13)', *JSNT* 30 (2008) 263–88; F. E. Udoh, 'The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave (Luke 16:1–8 [13])', *JBL* 128 (2009) 311–35, esp. 325–7.

22 E.g. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1098; Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth*, 119–22.

23 E.g. J. D. M. Derrett, 'Fresh Light on St. Luke xvi:1: Parable of the Unjust Steward', *NTS* 7 (1961) 198–219; reprinted, 'The Parable of the Unjust Steward', *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970) 48–77; *idem*, "'Take Thy Bond ... and Write Fifty'" (Luke xvi.6): The Nature of the Bond', *JTS NS* 23 (1972) 438–40; Marshall, *Luke*, 617; de Silva, 'Parable of the Prudent Steward', 262–3; Herzog, *Parables*, 255; Wright, 'Parables', 225.

24 Kloppenborg, 'Dishonoured Master', 479–86; Landry and May, 'Honor Restored', 289–90.

25 E.g. Via, *Parables*, 158, 159–61; Stein, *Introduction to the Parables*, 109–10; Beavis, 'Ancient Slavery', 50–1; Ireland, *Stewardship*, 73–83; Hultgren, *Parables*, 151.

26 Kloppenborg, 'Dishonoured Master'.

27 Landry and May, 'Honor Restored'.

28 Parrott, 'Dishonest Steward', 512–5.

29 J. K. Goodrich, 'Voluntary Debt Remission and the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13)', *JBL* 131 (2012) 547–66.

because it was in their own long-term interest for their tenants to succeed. From this perspective, the steward's actions were neither dishonest nor injurious to his master's welfare. The master commended the steward because he acted prudently in his own interest but at the same time in the best interest of all other parties concerned as well.

After praising the steward's prudence in 16.8a, the narrator continues with an explanation in 16.8b: 'For the sons of this age are more prudent than the sons of light in their own generation.' Interpreters sometimes refer to this sentence as an 'application' of the parable,³⁰ but no 'sons of light' appear as characters in the story. It would be a peculiar application that made the point of the story depend on elements that the story never mentions. It is better therefore to understand this sentence as a justification for the positive evaluation of the steward in 16.8a. Normally one would not expect a Christian narrator to ascribe a positive virtue to one of the sons of this age. The narrator justifies this ascription by limiting the sphere in which such praise applies: 'in their own generation', the sons of this age truly are prudent, better than the sons of light at handling matters pertaining to the present evil age.³¹

3. The Application of the Parable (Luke 16.9)

The parable concludes with an application: 'And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness so that when it is gone they may receive you into the eternal dwellings' (Luke 16.9).

A few scholars have proposed alternative translations for the phrase 'by means of (ἐκ) the mammon of unrighteousness'. Pasquale Colella assumes that the phrase mistranslates an Aramaic original that meant 'make for yourselves friends *rather than* (or *and not*) mammon'.³² Mary Ann Beavis takes it to mean 'make friends for yourselves *outside* the mammon of unrighteousness'.³³ David Flusser translates it as 'make for yourselves friends *from* the mammon of unrighteousness', that is, make friends of unbelievers who belong to the mammon of unrighteousness.³⁴ All of these proposals are unpersuasive attempts to avoid the most obvious meaning of the statement.

30 E.g. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 175–6; Lee, 'Wasteful Steward', 522; Hultgren, *Parables*, 148, 152.

31 'In v. 8b this surprising commendation by Jesus is explained: rightly understood, it is limited to the prudence of the children of this world in their dealings with one another, and does not refer to their relations with God' (Jeremias, *Parables*, 46).

32 P. Colella, 'Zu Lk 16 7', *ZNW* 64 (1973) 124–6 (emphasis original).

33 Beavis, 'Ancient Slavery', 52. Snodgrass lists earlier scholars with this view (*Stories*, 409 n. 93; emphasis original).

34 Flusser, 'Parable', 183–4 (emphasis original).

Another line of interpretation also seeks to avoid this meaning by taking the statement as ironic or sarcastic.³⁵ However, interpreters who take this view generally find it necessary to reword the statement. Donald Fletcher, for example, rewords it thus: “‘Make friends for yourselves”, he seems to taunt; “imitate the example of the steward; use the unrighteous mammon; surround yourselves with the type of insincere, self-interested friendship it can buy; how far will this carry you when the end comes and you are finally dismissed?”³⁶ Certainly it is possible to rewrite the statement to make it ironic or sarcastic, but nothing in the statement as Luke gives it suggests irony. As Klyne Snodgrass says, ‘without some textual clue that irony is involved no reader will understand this’.³⁷

Two questions of interpretation are most important here: who are the people to whom this exhortation is directed, and who are the people with ‘eternal dwellings’ whom they should befriend with unrighteous mammon? With respect to the first question, interpreters almost universally assume that this exhortation is directed to Jesus’ disciples. Support for this view comes from Luke 16.1, which says that Jesus told this story to his disciples.

With respect to the second question, some interpreters distinguish between those whom the disciples should befriend and those who receive them into the eternal dwellings. In this view, disciples should befriend the poor with donations of money. They will then be received into the eternal dwellings by the angels or God,³⁸ or by the personified good deeds of the donors.³⁹

These interpretations, however, are contradicted by the parable itself. In it, the debtors who receive financial benefit are the same as those who will receive the steward into their homes. One would expect the same to be the case in the application of the parable as well. Therefore, in an alternative interpretation, the poor who receive alms are also those who, as God’s agents, receive the disciples into the eternal dwellings. The eternal dwellings belong to the poor, as the beatitude states: ‘Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God’ (Luke 6.20). With this understanding, a typical interpretation of Luke 16.9 runs as follows: Jesus’ disciples should make friends of the poor by giving them charitable donations, so that in the eschatological kingdom the poor will receive the disciples into the eternal dwellings.⁴⁰

35 E.g. Fletcher, ‘Riddle’; du Plessis, ‘Philanthropy or Sarcasm’; Porter, ‘Parable’.

36 Fletcher, ‘Riddle’, 29; cf. du Plessis, ‘Philanthropy or Sarcasm’, 13.

37 Snodgrass, *Stories*, 409. Williams raises another objection to the ironic interpretation: ‘the steward is not somehow shown to be ridiculous, as the rich fool is’ (‘Is Almsgiving the Point’, 297).

38 E.g. Manson, *Sayings*, 293; Jeremias, *Parables*, 46 n. 85; Marshall, *Luke*, 621–2; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 415.

39 Williams, ‘Is Almsgiving the Point’, 295–6.

40 E.g. Hiers, ‘Friends’, 31–3; Topel, ‘On the Injustice’, 220–1, 226–7; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1106–7; Ireland, *Stewardship*, 96–105; R. A. J. Gagnon, ‘A Second Look at Two Lukan Parables:

This typical interpretation has some rather odd features. First, it is strange that Jesus' disciples have no eternal dwellings of their own but must rely on the hospitality of the poor.⁴¹ One would expect Jesus' disciples to have their own dwellings in the eschatological kingdom. Second, it is strange that Jesus' disciples are contrasted with the poor. The whole tenor of the Synoptic Gospels suggests that Jesus' disciples *are* the poor, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Even disciples who may have once possessed families and houses and lands have left them behind (Mark 10.28–31). Jesus' pronouncement 'Blessed are the poor' (Luke 6.20) may refer to the poor in general, but, in the context of both Luke and Q, it has followers of Jesus primarily in view, as Luke 6.22 indicates (cf. Matt 5.11).⁴²

From these indications, it seems clear that the typical interpretation of Luke 16.9 has gone astray. To get back on track, we need different answers for both main questions of interpretation. First, the assumption that the narrator directs the story to Jesus' disciples seems to be mistaken. While Luke does identify the disciples as the audience (Luke 16.1), he also portrays the Pharisees and scribes as present and listening (Luke 15.1–2; 16.14). Furthermore, Luke probably did not know to what audience the story was originally directed. He identified the disciples as the audience in his redaction.⁴³ If we put aside Luke's editorial comment, a different perspective emerges.

The parable exhorts its audience to make friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, that is, by means of money, seen as a necessary evil of the present unrighteous age.⁴⁴ This exhortation implies that the audience had access to such money. Theoretically individuals with even a small amount of money would qualify. However, if the story were directed to such people, we would expect the protagonist of the story to be poor, like the poor widow who gave all that she had to God (Mark 12.41–4). In that story, the choice of a widow as the protagonist is no accident. As the epitome of poverty, the widow serves as an example not only for the wealthy but also for other poor people, encouraging them to contribute out of their own poverty. Likewise, the choice of a steward as the protagonist in the parable of the unrighteous steward probably tells us something about the audience to which it is directed. As an agent

Reflections on the Unjust Steward and the Good Samaritan', *HBT* 20 (1998) 1–9, esp. 2–5; Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth*, 125–8; A. Giambrone, "Friends in Heavenly Habitations" (Luke 16:9): Charity, Repentance, and Luke's Resurrection Reversal', *RB* 120 (2013) 529–52, esp. 540–3.

41 Bovon, *Luke* 2, 450.

42 W. E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981) 77.

43 Jeremias, *Parables*, 47; Stein, *Introduction to the Parables*, 110; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1095–6.

44 On the expression 'mammon of unrighteousness', see Kosmala, 'Parable of the Unjust Steward'; Ireland, *Stewardship*, 97–9.

accustomed to dealing in large financial transactions, the steward serves as an example for other people who control wealth, encouraging them to use that wealth in a similar way.

It seems likely, therefore, that this parable was directed to the rich or to those who managed their wealth. If so, it is significant that the gospels generally present the rich as outsiders rather than insiders.⁴⁵ They distinguish the rich from Jesus' disciples. The rich man in one story fails to become a disciple of Jesus precisely because he will not give up his wealth (Mark 10.17–22). The rich whom Jesus excoriates in the woes against the rich are clearly outsiders (Luke 6.24–6). The rich fool who dies before he can enjoy his wealth (Luke 12.13–21) and the rich man who is tormented in Hades (Luke 16.19–31) are negative examples of the rich who retain their wealth and thus fail to become disciples of Jesus. The only good rich person is one like the tax collector Zacchaeus, who gives half of his belongings to the poor (Luke 19.1–10).⁴⁶

If the parable exhorts rich outsiders to make friends by means of their unrighteous money, this brings us back to the second question of interpretation, namely, who are the friends that they should cultivate? According to the parable, they should befriend those who have access to eternal dwellings. And who would have such dwellings if not the poor disciples of Jesus? While it is the poor who will inherit the kingdom of God (Luke 6.20–1), the gospels place Jesus' disciples squarely among the poor. Jesus promises them that since they have abandoned all to follow him, they will have eternal life in the age to come (Mark 10.28–30). In the present age, the disciples may be last in terms of wealth and status, but in the age to come, the roles will be reversed: the first will be last and the last will be first (Mark 10.31). In Luke's view, such reversal of fortune would begin immediately after death, as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus illustrates (Luke 16.19–31). While the rich man goes to the flames of Hades, the beggar Lazarus goes to 'Abraham's bosom', where he receives those good things that he lacked in life. Such reversal of fortune would no doubt continue in the new age, when the kingdom of God would be established on earth.

In all likelihood therefore, this parable exhorted the rich to use their wealth to make friends of Jesus' poor disciples. How then should they do so? Zacchaeus the tax collector provides one example when he gives half of his belongings to the poor (Luke 19.1–10). The unrighteous steward, however, provides another kind of example. He befriends his master's debtors by reducing their debts.⁴⁷

45 This point is made with respect to the Gospel of Luke by J. Dupont, *Les beatitudes* (3 vols.; Paris: Gabalda, 1973) III.206.

46 The one exception is Joseph of Arimathea, whom Matthew identifies as a rich man (Matt 27.57). Whether the women in Luke 8.1 are wealthy or not, they contribute their belongings to Jesus and the twelve.

47 In one interpretation of the parable, forgiving debts represents forgiving sins (Topel, 'On the Injustice'; Loader, 'Jesus and the Rogue'; Lee, 'Wasteful Steward', Reinmuth, 'Der

No doubt the disciples of Jesus would have appreciated either form of financial benefit. However, this particular story focuses on debt reduction. The meaning of Luke 16.9 thus runs as follows: rich outsiders should use their unrighteous wealth to make friends of Jesus' poor disciples, specifically by reducing their debts, so that in the eschatological kingdom Jesus' disciples will receive these benefactors into their eternal dwellings.

4. The Setting of the Parable in Early Christianity

The occurrence of the Aramaic term 'mammon' in Luke 16.9 indicates that this parable circulated among Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians in Palestine. Gerd Theissen has suggested one possible setting for Palestinian traditions relating to possessions, wealth and poverty, namely, the ministry of itinerant Christian charismatics in Palestine in the first century.⁴⁸ According to Theissen, sayings that urge renunciation of possessions, as well as renunciation of home and family, reflect the ethical norms of these wandering preachers. While we can agree that some sayings of this type may have come from this context,⁴⁹ those passages that express concern for the poor or advocate using possessions to benefit others probably reflect a setting in a settled community. The parable of the unjust steward fits better into this latter context than in the context of radical itinerancy. It is likely that it reflects the efforts of Palestinian Christians to enlist the financial support of wealthy patrons outside the community.

The church in Jerusalem apparently concerned itself with finances from the beginning.⁵⁰ According to Acts, the Jesus people in Jerusalem practised

beschuldigte Verwalter'; L. Thurén, *Parables Unplugged: Reading the Lukan Parables in their Rhetorical Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) 123–47). However, in the story the steward does not forgive the debts but merely reduces them.

48 G. Theissen, 'The Wandering Radicals: Light Shed by the Sociology of Literature on the Early Transmission of Jesus Sayings', *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 33–59; *idem*, "We Have Left Everything ..." (Mark 10:28): Discipleship and Social Uprooting in the Jewish-Palestinian Society of the First Century', *Social Reality*, 60–93; *idem*, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

49 Theissen's thesis receives a less positive evaluation from R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 228–31. See also L. Schottroff and W. Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986) 48–9.

50 D. L. Mealand has identified three periods in Palestine from 30 to 70 CE that might serve as historical settings for gospel traditions relating to possessions, wealth and poverty: the initial founding of the Christian community in Jerusalem, the famine of ca. 48 CE, and the crisis in the sixties leading up to the Jewish revolt of 66 CE (*Poverty and Expectation in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1980) 38–41).

community of goods. Members of this community sold their possessions, including their lands and houses, and either distributed the proceeds to those in need or brought the proceeds to the apostles to distribute (Acts 2.44–5; 4.32, 34–7). As Luke describes it, the entire community, not just itinerant charismatics, participated in this practice of selling possessions and giving to the needy.

In stating that the believers were of ‘one soul’ (Acts 4.32) and had ‘all things in common’ (Acts 2.44; 4.32), Luke portrayed the Jerusalem community in terms drawn from Greek ideals of friendship or utopian society; and in claiming that no one among them was needy (Acts 4.34), he drew on the utopian hope of ancient Israel described in Deuteronomy 15.4.⁵¹ Some critics think that Luke invented this picture of communal sharing by taking isolated instances of giving and elevating them to the level of universal practice.⁵² Clearly not all members of the community could have sold their houses, or they would have had no place to stay.⁵³ However, though Luke may have idealised the picture, it need not be entirely fictitious. According to Philo and Josephus, the Essenes of that time practised community of goods.⁵⁴ The same was probably true at Qumran, though this conclusion has been disputed.⁵⁵ It is not implausible, therefore, that the early Christian community in Jerusalem practised some form of communal sharing that involved selling one’s possessions and contributing to a common fund.⁵⁶

51 L. T. Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* (SBLDS 39; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977) 2–5; D. L. Mealand, ‘Community of Goods and Utopian Allusions in Acts II–IV’, *JTS* n.s. 28 (1977) 96–9; H.-J. Klauck, ‘Gütergemeinschaft in der klassischen Antike, in Qumran und im Neuen Testament’, *RevQ* 11 (1982) 47–79, esp. 72–4; D. P. Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts* (SNTU B/6; Linz: Fuchs, 1982) 200–7.

52 Johnson, *Literary Function*, 5–8; E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 233–5; H. Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 24.

53 Acts 12.12 refers to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, as a meeting place for disciples.

54 Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.4–5, 10–13; *Good Person* 12.85–7; Josephus, *J.W.* 2.119–61; *Ant.* 18.20, 22. Cf. Klauck, ‘Gütergemeinschaft’, 52–7.

55 B. J. Capper gives a survey of the debate and defends the view that full members of the community practised full community of goods (‘Community of Goods in the *Rule of the Community* (1QS) and Comparative Analysis of the Advanced Probationer’s Renunciation of Administration of his Property in Other Fully Property-Sharing Groups’, *QC* 20 (2012) 89–150).

56 S. E. Johnson, ‘The Dead Sea Manual of Discipline and the Jerusalem Church of Acts’, *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. K. Stendahl; New York: Harper, 1957; reprinted, New York: Crossroad, 1992) 129–42, esp. 131–3; M. Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 31–4; Mealand, ‘Community of Goods and Utopian Allusions’, 99; J. Dupont, ‘Community of Goods in the Early Church’, *The Salvation of the Gentiles: Essays on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 85–102, esp. 88, 89, 94; Klauck, ‘Gütergemeinschaft’, 68–79; C. K. Barrett,

The exhortation ‘Sell your possessions and give charity’ in Luke 12.33 probably had its original setting in this context.⁵⁷ Giving alms or charity (ἐλεημοσύνη) was a traditional pillar of Jewish piety, and several passages in Matthew and Luke-Acts refer to it.⁵⁸ However, only Luke 12.33 makes selling possessions the prelude to giving charity. While normal Jewish charity would not require one to sell possessions, such a practice matches Luke’s description of the communal sharing in Jerusalem, where believers sold their possessions and distributed the proceeds to the needy (Acts 2.45).

While the Essenes apparently instituted a communal system that worked over a prolonged period, we have indications within the New Testament that the system instituted in Jerusalem proved inadequate. Three factors may have contributed to its problems.

First, in an agrarian economy, in which most people gain their livelihood through agriculture, a communal effort would have limited success without farmable land. If the Jesus people converted their fields into cash, as Luke indicates, the community would soon find itself without the means to support itself.⁵⁹

Second, at some point during the years 46–8, Palestine experienced a famine.⁶⁰ At that time, it became necessary for churches outside of Palestine to support Christians in Judea. Luke records that the church in Antioch sent a charitable contribution to bring financial relief to ‘the brothers dwelling in Judea’ (Acts 11.27–30; 12.25). Likewise the apostle Paul relates a meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem, at which they urged him to ‘remember the poor’, which Paul says he was eager to do (Gal 2.10). Paul did remember the poor by raising a collection from the

A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 1.167–70, 251–5; B. J. Capper, ‘The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods’, *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, vol. IV: *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* (ed. R. Bauckham; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) 323–56; *idem*, ‘Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church’, *ANRW* II.26.2 (1995) 1730–4; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 270.

57 Some critics attribute this saying to Lukan redaction, but it is more likely that it came from Luke’s special material (D. Burkett, *Rethinking the Gospel Sources*, vol. II: *The Unity and Plurality of Q* (ECL 1; Leiden: Brill/Atlanta: SBL, 2009) 190–2).

58 Matt 6.2, 3, 4; Luke 11.41; Acts 3.2, 3, 10; 9.36; 10.2, 4, 31; 24.17

59 Though we can only speculate, it is possible that community members did not expect to need their fields or houses much longer since they believed that Jesus would return soon to take them into the kingdom of God.

60 Acts 11.27–8; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.51–3; 20.100–1; cf. 3.320. See K. S. Gapp, ‘The Universal Famine Under Claudius’, *HTR* 28 (1935) 258–65; B. W. Winter, ‘Acts and Food Shortages’, *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, vol. II: *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (ed. D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 59–78.

churches that he had established in Asia Minor and Greece, which he then carried to ‘the poor among the saints at Jerusalem’ (Rom 15.26). Paul mentioned this collection several times in his letters,⁶¹ referring to it as an ‘offering’ or ‘gift’ that would supply the ‘needs’ of the saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor 9.1, 5, 12). He praised those who gave from their own ‘deep poverty’ to share in this ministry to the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8.1–4).⁶²

A third problem with the Jerusalem system was that it did not appeal to those who had the most to contribute: the wealthy. In order to become fully integrated into the community, the wealthy would have to sell their possessions and become part of the communal system. A rich person who chose to retain his or her possessions would not have found a comfortable fit in this community. The story of the rich young man illustrates this point (Mark 10.17–27). When he is told that he must sell all that he has and distribute to the poor in order to become a follower of Jesus, he goes away disappointed because he does not wish to divest himself of his property. While this story is set in Jesus’ lifetime, it would have served in the Jerusalem church as a negative example story. The young man’s response would represent the reaction of many wealthy people to the requirement that they sell their possessions and give to the needy in order to become part of the community.

Faced with this reaction from the wealthy, the Jesus people apparently looked for alternative ways that the wealthy could contribute to the support of the community. The story of Zacchaeus shows one way. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus is a wealthy man. Though he does not sell all that he has, he gives half of it to the poor. This seems to suffice, since in the story Jesus proclaims that Zacchaeus’ household has received salvation as a result (Luke 19.1–10).

The parable of the unrighteous steward fits into this same context. It demonstrates yet another way in which the wealthy might contribute to the support of the community without becoming actual members of it. The parable implies that some of the Jesus people in or near Jerusalem owed debts, perhaps as tenant farmers, to wealthy landowners.⁶³ As tenants of this kind, they would owe the landowners part of the produce, such as oil or wheat. The parable suggests that these wealthy landowners, or their agents, should reduce the amount

61 Rom 15.25–9; 1 Cor 16.1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; cf. Acts 24.17.

62 When Paul and others in the New Testament refer to the Jerusalem community as ‘poor’, they use the term in its literal economic sense (L. E. Keck, ‘The Poor among the Saints in the New Testament’, *ZNW* 56 (1965) 100–29).

63 On land ownership in Palestine, see M. Hengel, ‘Das Gleichnis von den Weingärtnern Mc 12 1–12 im Lichte der Zenopapyri und der rabbinischen Gleichnisse’, *ZNW* 59 (1968) 1–39, esp. 20–1; S. Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian 323 BCE to 135 CE: A Study of Second Temple Judaism* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier/Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980) 156–70.

that the tenants owed.⁶⁴ In using their ‘unrighteous mammon’ in this manner, they would make friends of the Jesus people. When Jesus returned and established the kingdom of God, the tables would be turned. The rich and powerful would be humbled, and the poor Jesus people would be exalted and granted ‘eternal dwellings’. At that time, because their former creditors had treated them well, the Jesus people would receive them into their households.

If this understanding is correct, this parable was directed to wealthy people with whom the Jesus people had economic ties, people whom they would encounter regularly in their day-to-day business affairs. Such wealthy individuals may or may not have been sympathetic to the Jesus movement, but they did not wish to join it if they had to sell all that they possessed and give away the proceeds. This parable encourages such individuals to use their wealth in another way to benefit the Jesus people. Such an arrangement would benefit both sides. The Jesus people would gain financial assistance from the wealthy that they otherwise would not receive. The wealthy, in turn, could participate in the salvation to come without completely divesting themselves of their worldly possessions in the present. While the story encourages the wealthy to make this exchange, we cannot say whether it ever persuaded any of them to do so. They may have responded like the Pharisees who hear the parable in Luke’s account: labelled by Luke as ‘lovers of money’, they simply mock the idea (Luke 16.14).

5. The Parable as Extended Metaphor

Most previous interpretations of this parable have been influenced by the theory of Adolf Jülicher, who maintained that Jesus’ parables had a single point of comparison. According to this view, the early Christians misunderstood the parables as allegory, a series of metaphors with multiple points of comparison. Therefore any parable with multiple points of comparison represents a later allegorical revision of Jesus’ original parable.⁶⁵ Most critics today have concluded that Jülicher was wrong to exclude allegory from parables that Jesus might have spoken.⁶⁶ However, he was clearly right that the early church understood the

64 The Zenon papyri from the third century BCE describe tenant farmers who thought that the rent collector exacted too much of their produce (Hengel, ‘Das Gleichnis’, 12–16; Freyne, *Galilee*, 157).

65 A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1899–1910²) 152–148.

66 E.g. R. E. Brown, ‘Parable and Allegory Reconsidered’, *NovT* 5 (1962) 36–45; M. I. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (CBQMS 6; Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977); H.-J. Klauck, *Allegorie und Allegorese in synoptischen Gleichnistexten* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978); D. B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying about the Parables?* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000) 85–101; Snodgrass, *Stories*, 15–17; S. K. Wong, *Allegorical Spectrum of the Parables of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017). For a defence and restatement of Jülicher’s view, see Thurén, *Parables Unplugged*, 14–22.

parables to have multiple points of comparison.⁶⁷ The parable of the steward is no exception. The application in Luke 16.9 treats this parable as an extended metaphor with more than one point of comparison. The steward is analogous to those outside the Christian community who had or managed wealth, the debtors are analogous to early Christians who owed them, and the master is analogous to God.

From the perspective of early Christians, the steward in the parable was analogous in several respects to wealthy outsiders. First, just as the steward managed not his own wealth, but the wealth of his master, so the wealthy did not own their wealth, but merely functioned as stewards of resources that God entrusted to them.⁶⁸ The parable implies this analogy, and the saying that follows the parable confirms it (Luke 16.10–12). It presupposes that those with ‘unrighteous mammon’ have been entrusted with it, presumably by God. Second, just as the steward was ‘unrighteous’, so too were the wealthy and their wealth: they were ‘the sons of this age’ who belonged to the sphere of unrighteousness and dealt in ‘the mammon of unrighteousness’. Third, just as the steward was judged by his master for squandering his goods, so the wealthy stood under the judgement of God for wasting his goods, which they should have shared with the poor.

The debtors play less of a role in the parable than the steward. They have one feature in common with the early Christians: both groups owed debts. In the application, the early Christians owed the wealthy. However, since the wealthy were merely stewards of God’s resources, in effect they owed God, just as the debtors in the parable owed the master rather than the steward.

The master in the parable is analogous to God in two respects. First, just as the master fired the steward for squandering his possessions, so in the coming kingdom God would take away the possessions of the rich because they failed to use them to help the poor. Second, just as the master in the parable commended the steward for reducing the debts of his tenants, so God would look favourably on the rich if they reduced the debts of the early Christians in Palestine.⁶⁹

These correspondences between the parable and the world of early Christianity make possible the main point: the steward’s action in his situation could serve as an example for wealthy outsiders in their analogous situation. Just as the steward used unrighteous mammon to win friends in order to ensure his future, so should the wealthy use their wealth to make friends of the Jesus people in order to secure their own eschatological future.

67 Notable instances include the interpretation of the parable of the sower (Mark 4.13–20) and the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12.1–12).

68 ‘Underlying [the parable’s] symbolism is the idea, familiar to Jewish piety, that a man in practicing almsgiving distributes, not his own property, but property which is already God’s’ (Williams, ‘Is Almsgiving the Point’, 294, citing *Pirqe Aboth* 3.7). Cf. also Did. 1.5.

69 Cf. Chilton, *Galilean Rabbi*, 120–1.

6. Conclusion

Traditional explanations of the parable of the unrighteous steward raise the question of how an unethical character could serve as a positive example for Jesus' disciples. The interpretation proposed here avoids this problem, since the steward serves as a model not for disciples but for wealthy outsiders. The solution that the steward finds for his problem in the story serves as a positive example for the wealthy in their own analogous situation. Like the steward who lost his job, the unrighteous wealthy would face a bleak prospect when their wealth ran out, either at death or at the arrival of God's kingdom. While the parable does not condone their unrighteousness, it does suggest a course of action by which they could use their unrighteous mammon prudently to prepare for the eschatological future.