

TOWARD TAMING THE PARABLE  
OF THE SHREWD STEWARD (LUKE 16:1–13)  
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If the work of biblical scholarship is to clarify the meaning of biblical texts,<sup>1</sup> then the Parable of the Shrewd Steward is an instance in which the discipline has struggled mightily. As L. John Topel lamented decades ago, “[t]he literature dealing with the parable of the unjust steward is staggering, and after all the effort expended, its meaning still eludes us.”<sup>2</sup> Later, Thomas G. Long reflected, “It is amusing to prowl through the history of interpretation of this text and to count the stubbed hermeneutical toes.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the story is one of Jesus’s most enigmatic teachings. Scholars have called it, *inter alia*, “perplexing,” “difficult,” “puzzling,” and “baffling.”<sup>4</sup> Anthony Giambrone observes that its complexities are “notorious.”<sup>5</sup> Some have even suggested the original meaning is lost and unrecoverable.<sup>6</sup> While fatalism is not warranted, there is an acute need to demystify the story and its meaning, if there is a credible basis for doing so.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael R. Weed, “The Layman, the Theologian, and the Church,” *ResQ* 23.1 (1980): 19.

<sup>2</sup> L. John Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Lk 16:1–13,” *CBQ* 37.2 (1975): 216.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Long, “Getting by with a Little Help from My Friends: Preaching the Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *STR* 44.2 (2001): 164.

<sup>4</sup> William Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue in Luke 16,1–8A The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *RB* 96.4 (1989): 518; John K. Goodrich, “Voluntary Debt Remission and the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13),” *JBL* 131.3 (2012): 547–553; I. J. du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm? – Another Look at the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1–13),” *Neot* 24.1 (1990): 1; Hans J. B. Combrink, “A Social-Scientific Perspective on the Parable of the ‘Unjust’ Steward (Lk 16:1–8a),” *Neot* 30.2 (1996): 289; Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–8),” *JBL* 111.1 (1992): 44; Goodrich, “Voluntary Debt Remission,” 547; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:1–13),” *TS* 25.1 (1964): 23; Marlene Yu Yap, “Three Parables of Jesus Through the Shame–Honor Lens,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 19.2 (2016): 215.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Giambrone, “‘Friends in Heavenly Habitations’ (Luke 16:9): Charity, Repentance, and Luke’s Resurrection Reversal,” *RB* 120.4 (2013): 538.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh, Revised edition. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 199–200; Loader admits that the parable is interpreted in 16:8b–13 but argues that the interpretations are “attempts to make sense of a parable whose original setting and original meaning has been lost or left aside” and ignores their restraining force. Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue,” 520–521.

When scholars begin with the assumption that the original meaning is hopelessly obscure, they potentially grant themselves license to pursue even highly speculative lines of interpretation on their quest for satisfactory exegetical answers. As a result, the universe of approaches and interpretations to the parable has run wild.<sup>7</sup> One scholar reads the parable as an illustration of “the roguery of divine grace.”<sup>8</sup> Another posits the “policy of voluntary debt remission in Roman farm tenancy provides a plausible context in which to interpret the master’s praise.”<sup>9</sup> Still another submits that it is a clandestine assault of the institution of slavery.<sup>10</sup> Exegetes sometimes acknowledge that critics have interpreted the parable in a myriad of contexts without reaching a consensus regarding its meaning and then proceed to propound their own imaginative proposals.<sup>11</sup>

The consequence of rather unbounded efforts to uncover the parable’s meaning or, in many cases, to read meaning into an ostensibly orphaned parable, has been a bewildering and sometimes embarrassing maze of interpretive options.<sup>12</sup> The continuing disagreements among scholars regarding the parable, along with sometimes fantastic approaches to understanding it,

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<sup>7</sup> David Landry and Ben May, “Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1–8a),” *JBL* 119.2 (2000): 309.

<sup>8</sup> Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue,” 518–532.

<sup>9</sup> Goodrich, “Voluntary Debt Remission,” 547–566.

<sup>10</sup> Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 37–54.

<sup>11</sup> “[T]he very diversity of approaches invites further attempts.” Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue,” 519; see, e.g., Delbert Burkett, “The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward (Luke 16.1–9): A Prudent Use of Mammon,” *NTS* 64.3 (2018): 327.

<sup>12</sup> Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Parables about Money,” in *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 401–402; Bernard Brandon Scott, “A Master’s Praise Luke 16,1–8a,” *Bib* 64.2 (1983): 173; J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 48.

add to the feelings of some that the Bible is inaccessible and the frustrations of others who lean toward scholarly aids for help in resolving some of the texts's thornier issues.<sup>13</sup>

This article does not purport to solve all of the long-standing difficulties presented by this intriguing parable. Others have seemingly embraced that assignment, and more will likely do so in the future. The goal here is admittedly less ambitious. This article calls for a reigning in or “taming” of the parable by substantially narrowing the field of credible interpretations. The parable itself, Luke’s account of Jesus delivering it, and the ensuing sayings are intended to communicate something definite. Thus, attempts to reimagine them so they are more palatable in light of modern tendencies and sensibilities are inappropriate and counterproductive in attempting to uncover the message or messages Jesus, and subsequently Luke, intended to convey. Rather than directly treating the final conclusions exegetes reach, this article considers an initial decision they must make regarding the literary content rightly involved in the analysis. More pointedly, it argues that a credible interpretation of Luke 16:1–8a—the parable proper—is constrained by the sayings in Luke 16:8b–13 and briefly illustrates how integrating them narrows the field of convincing interpretations.

### I. The Consensus About the Sayings in Luke 16:b–13

A comprehensive review of the literature surrounding the parable is beyond the present scope, and such reviews have been ably accomplished on other occasions.<sup>14</sup> It is necessary to note, however, that the genesis of confusion regarding the Parable of the Shrewd Steward has

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<sup>13</sup> Weed, “The Layman, the Theologian, and the Church,” 19.

<sup>14</sup> Landry and May, “Honor Restored,” 287–94; D. J. Ireland, “A History of Recent Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13),” *WTJ* 51.2 (1989): 293–318; Snodgrass, “Parables about Money,” 406–409.

been manifold. For instance, scholars have disagreed about the original boundaries of its content. Some have contended that the parable proper ends with verse 16:7. Others have argued that it terminates at 16:8a.<sup>15</sup> While unanimity does not exist, a consensus has developed around the latter position,<sup>16</sup> and the discussion here proceeds with the understanding that the actual parable is contained in verses 16:1–8a.

The greatest difficulty centers on the master’s praise for ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς ἀδικίας—the unrighteous steward in 16:8a. The commendation of this anti-hero gives the parable, as Robert A. J. Gagnon described it, “a scandalous quality.”<sup>17</sup> As I. J. du Plessis fittingly distilled the concern, “[a]nyone who is familiar with the preaching of Jesus would like to know how it is possible that Jesus could have told a parable in which a man is recommended for corruption.”<sup>18</sup> Efforts to reconcile this perceived conundrum have undergirded much of the scholarly imagination and industry surrounding the parable. This has been beneficial in some respects because it has produced a wealth of insights adding texture to the setting of a story that unfolded nearly two millennia ago in a vastly different culture from modern academics, particularly modern Western academics. In other respects, though, the untethered nature of the discussion has led to reimaginings of the story in ways more akin to rewriting it than interpreting it.

The emphasis here is on a third controversy, one receiving less direct and formal attention even though it is closely related to the other two: should the sayings in Luke 16:8b–13

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<sup>15</sup> For brief surveys of scholars who have taken up these various positions, see Snodgrass, “Parables about Money,” 406–410; Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 27.

<sup>16</sup> Snodgrass, “Parables about Money,” 411; Lauri Thurén, “The Unjust Steward (16:1–9),” in *Parables Unplugged: Reading the Lukan Parables in Their Rhetorical Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 111; Landry and May, “Honor Restored,” 288.

<sup>17</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, “A Second Look at Two Lukan Parables: Reflections on the Unjust Steward and the Good Samaritan,” *HBT* 20.1 (1998): 1.

<sup>18</sup> du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?,” 1.

be considered when interpreting Luke 16:1–8a? Many scholars suggest that Luke borrowed all or part of the sayings in 16:8b–13 and appended it to the parable, likely in order to help make application of what would otherwise have been unclear to his readers and perhaps even to himself.<sup>19</sup> For instance, Bernard Brandon Scott discounts 16:8b as “an addition by oral tradition,” and John Nolland considers it “a Lukan editorial comment.”<sup>20</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer opines that 16:8b–13 is entirely extraneous to the parable and was added by Luke or someone else.<sup>21</sup> Fabian E. Udoh seemingly questions whether the parable was even spoken by Jesus and asserts that 16:9–13 suggests “the author of the Gospel inherited the story, in which he or she endeavored to find some meaning.”<sup>22</sup>

The scholarly consensus is that the material is extraneous to the original parable and should be disregarded when interpreting it.<sup>23</sup> Scholars who favor excising the verses state that they do not belong with the parable or implicitly do so by ignoring them altogether.<sup>24</sup> For instance, many, if not most, of the articles designating the parable’s limits in the title refer only to 16:1–8, or perhaps 16:1–9, and discuss only those verses.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, scholars who

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<sup>19</sup> Combrink, “A Social–Scientific Perspective,” 289–291; Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 26–27; Burkett, “The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward,” 327; Long, “Getting by with a Little Help from My Friends,” 166; Kasper Bro Larsen, “Den kloge godsforvalter (Luk 16,1–8a),” *DTT* 80.2–3 (2017): 166–167; Fabian E. Udoh, “The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave (Luke 16:1–18[13]),” *JBL* 128.2 (2009): 314.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, “A Master’s Praise Luke,” 176; John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, WBC 35b (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 801.

<sup>21</sup> Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 27–30, 38–39.

<sup>22</sup> Udoh, “The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave,” 314.

<sup>23</sup> “[I]nterpretations that attempt to include 16:8b–13 are relatively rare.” Landry and May, “Honor Restored,” 289; D. L. Mathewson, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13): A Reexamination of the Traditional View in Light of Recent Challenges,” *JETS* 38.1 (1995): 29; Martin Lee, “The Wasteful Steward,” *NBf* 78.922 (1997): 520–21; “Vv 10–13 have no connection at all with the preceding parable....” Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 806.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Luca Marulli, “‘And How Much Do You Owe...? Take Your Bill, Sit Down Quickly, and Write...’ (Luke 16:5–6),” *TynBul* 63.2 (2012): 199–216.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, “A Master’s Praise,” 173–88; Landry and May, “Honor Restored”; Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue,”

acknowledge the relevance of 16:8b–13 sometimes discuss the sayings without seriously addressing the underlying dispute regarding the propriety of doing so.<sup>26</sup>

While there is general agreement that most, if not all, of the sayings following the parable are Lukan interpolations, and thus properly excised from 16:1–8a, the appropriateness of this conclusion has rarely, if ever, been meaningfully explored. As Ryan S. Schellenberg noted, “[C]onsensus is as often an indicator of neglect as of compelling resolution.”<sup>27</sup> In this instance, the consensus does not seem to be supported by either concrete evidence or compelling argumentation.

## II. Common Arguments for Excising the Sayings in Luke 16b–13

While the refrain for severing all or part of the sayings in 16:8b–13 is consistent, the actual arguments for doing so are sparse and somewhat amorphous. In many cases, they are more akin to judicial *dicta* than authoritative reasoning. The three primary contentions are that (1) the sayings are disjointed from the Parable of the Shrewd Steward, (2) the phrase καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω in 16:9 signals a shift toward Lukan commentary, and (3) the adoption from Q of the maxim in 16:13 proves the sayings are separate logia appended to the parable proper.

### *“The Sayings Present a Series of Non Sequiturs”*

Some have argued that the sayings, or at least some parts of them, fit awkwardly with the parable, and this awkwardness suggests they are either imported from other contexts or created

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518–32; Thurén, “The Unjust Steward,” 107–148; Burkett, “The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward,” 326–342.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Gagnon, “A Second Look at Two Lukan Parables,” 2–5.

<sup>27</sup> Ryan S. Schellenberg, “Which Master? Whose Steward? Metalepsis and Lordship in the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Lk. 16.1–13),” *JSNT* 30.3 (2008): 264.

by Luke.<sup>28</sup> In particular, Fitzmyer declares that 16:8b is not part of the original parable because “it follows strangely on v. 8a, and indeed on the whole preceding parable” and 16:10 is “more at home” in the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:11–27).<sup>29</sup> According to him, the content of the verses is “really extraneous to the parable.”<sup>30</sup> Long agrees and refers to the sayings as “a string of non sequiturs that Luke tacks onto the end of the story.”<sup>31</sup> John S. Kloppenborg goes even further and alleges “[t]he sayings in vv. 10–12 divert attention yet further away from the parable and its conclusion by exploiting the dichotomy of earthly and spiritual introduced in v. 9, and by developing the maxim that faithfulness (or unfaithfulness) in lesser matters is an indication of the same in weightier matters.”<sup>32</sup>

Opining that the sayings may follow strangely, as some do, is a far cry from concluding they do not, in fact, follow. Arguments that the sayings in 16:8b–13 are disjointed from the parable in 16:1–8a are overstated, if not misguided, because the parallels between the parable proper and the subsequent sayings are strong.<sup>33</sup> Generally, each concerns the ideas of faithful stewardship and shrewd handling of material wealth when confronted with the specter of securing a new dwelling place. The unfaithful steward in the parable seeks a new abode because he knows he will imminently be cast out of his present one (16:4). Jesus advises his listeners to

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<sup>28</sup> Francis E. Williams, “Is Almsgiving the Point of the ‘Unjust Steward’?,” *JBL* 83.3 (1964): 296–297; du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?,” 16.

<sup>29</sup> Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 28–29.

<sup>30</sup> Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 29.

<sup>31</sup> Long, “Getting by with a Little Help from My Friends,” 165.

<sup>32</sup> John S. Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master (Luke 16,1–8a),” *Bib* 70.4 (1989): 475.

<sup>33</sup> Thurén, “The Unjust Steward,” 135.

emulate his shrewdness, but not necessarily his tactics, and operate with a similar degree of urgency, albeit in a spiritual rather than carnal context (16:9–12).

The use of parallel terms and concepts in the distinct parts of the pericope also makes their close relationship unmistakable. First, forms of the word κύριος (“lord”) appear in 16:3, 16:5, 16:8, and 16:13. Second, the discussion of unrighteousness (ἄδικός and ἀδικίας) concludes the parable in 16:8a and then continues in the next three verses. Third, the reference to οἰκέτης in 16:13 corresponds to οἰκονόμον, οἰκονομίας, and οἰκονόμος in 16:1, 16:2 and 16:3, respectively, and draws the reader back into the parable.<sup>34</sup> Fourth, while μαμωνᾶ only appears in the sayings (16:9, 11, 13), the references clearly hearken back to the steward’s alleged waste of his rich master’s wealth and his subsequent shrewd financial dealings.

The entire pericope is tied together by common subject matter, terms, and concepts, and this observation “should caution the reader against prematurely divorcing the two passages.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than being extraneous to or diverting attention from the parable, the sayings “counterbalance the scandal of the parable.”<sup>36</sup> As Donald R. Fletcher concludes, the sayings “are admirably adjusted to the context.”<sup>37</sup> By interweaving terms and concepts throughout the pericope, it seems inevitable that Luke expects his readers to both ingest and understand it as one unit.

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<sup>34</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 6th ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 597.

<sup>35</sup> Goodrich, “Voluntary Debt Remission,” 565.

<sup>36</sup> Garwood P. Anderson, “Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost: Luke’s Restoration of an Enigmatic Parable Tradition,” *CBQ* 70.4 (2008): 738–739.

<sup>37</sup> Donald R. Fletcher, “The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?,” *JBL* 82.1 (1963): 21.

*“Καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω Introduces a Lukan Narrative Section”*

Some exegetes claim the phrase καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω (“and I tell you”) announces a substantial change beginning at Luke 16:9. William Loader, for instance, asserts the phrase “has all the marks of an interpretive addition, which uses the parable in a new and different way from its original meaning,” but he does not bother to identify the marks to which he refers.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Martin Lee argues 16:9 and following do not belong with the parable because the phrase suggests the beginning of a new paragraph or section.<sup>39</sup> Although he claims the phrase “is a sure sign that the saying it introduces was originally distinct, a stand alone saying of solemn weight,” and it is therefore “wrong” to connect 16:8 with the following verses, he offers no further support for his conclusion.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the definitive tone of these assertions, it is telling that neither Loader nor Lee offers examples of Jesus or Luke using the phrase ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω in the ways they describe. In fact, the phrase does not introduce a change of either speaker or subject.<sup>41</sup> In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus often uses substantially similar constructions to relate back to and amplify his prior comments.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Luke records him doing so with other parables within the travel narrative section of his Gospel, including the Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Parable of

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<sup>38</sup> Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue,” 520.

<sup>39</sup> Lee, “The Wasteful Steward,” 521, 528.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, “The Wasteful Steward,” 521, 528.

<sup>41</sup> Udoh, “The Tale of an Unrighteous Slave,” 327.

<sup>42</sup> Snodgrass, “Parables about Money,” 411; du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?,” 11; see, e.g., Luke 4:25; 9:27; 10:24 (λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν); 12:51 (οὐχὶ λέγω ὑμῖν); 13:3, 5 (οὐχὶ λέγω ὑμῖν); 17:34 (λέγω ὑμῖν).

the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.<sup>43</sup> Bart B. Bruehler is undoubtedly correct that the sayings “clearly follow from the preceding story as introduced by καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω in v. 9.”<sup>44</sup>

While some would identify the introductory clause of 16:9a as an indication that the sayings are not intended to be read with the parable, the lack of support for so pivotal a contention is striking. In fact, the evidence supports the opposite conclusion. The clause naturally connects the parable to, rather than distinguishes it from, the ensuing applications. As Garwood P. Anderson rightly observed, “In Luke, the formula [λέγω ὑμῖν] characteristically marks the end of the parable’s narrative and introduces the application or commentary of Jesus directed toward the parable’s narrative audience.... In each case, Jesus supplies a comment that amounts to a concluding interpretation.”<sup>45</sup> In Luke 16:9, καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω introduces a balance to what the master in the parable said to the steward.<sup>46</sup>

*“Luke 16:13 is Borrowed from Q Material”*

Several scholars have averred both that the commonality between Luke 16:13 and Matt 6:24 proves 16:13 is borrowed from the hypothetical Q source and that 16:8b–13 is comprised of independent sayings appended by Luke.<sup>47</sup> However, this deduction greatly exaggerates the force

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<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Luke 18:8 (λέγω ὑμῖν) and 18:14 (λέγω ὑμῖν).

<sup>44</sup> Bart B. Bruehler, “Reweaving the Texture of Luke 16:14–18,” *JBPR* 5 (2013): 53.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, “Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost,” 740.

<sup>46</sup> Richard H. Hiers, “Friends by Unrighteous Mammon: The Eschatological Proletariat (Luke 16:9),” *JAAR* 38.1 (1970): 32; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, ICC (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1925), 385.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?,” 15; “V. 13 is from Q material, while the rest of the section is peculiar to Lk. This in itself suggests that we have a compilation of related sayings here; they have been added by a compiler to the parable on the basis of a broad community of theme.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 622–623; Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 387; Long, “Getting by with a Little Help from My Friends,” 166; Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master,” 475; Larsen, “Den kloge godsforvalter,” 183.

of the observation. As an initial matter, whatever conclusion one might draw regarding the original source and context of the saying in 16:13 does not necessarily hold for 16:8b–12 if the material is an amalgam of distinct teachings. If the sayings are a series of separate logia, as some suppose, it is strange, indeed, to discard them in such a wholesale fashion. Consistency would require independent analysis and treatment of each saying, and there are no parallels from Q for the other sayings.

Moreover, there is no compelling reason Jesus could not or would not have repeated fundamental sayings throughout his ministry on various occasions to different audiences. In fact, the biblical record demonstrates that he did. For instance, the four Gospel writers record Jesus's statements regarding the radical inversion of preserving one's life by losing it in slightly different words and contexts, and Matthew and Luke each present him as making the statement on separate occasions (see, e.g., Matt 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25). Similarly, the Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Minas are not altogether parallel, but they are strikingly similar and deployed in different contexts with slightly different emphases.<sup>48</sup>

There is no way to say for certain that Luke's context—connecting 16:13 with the Parable of the Shrewd Steward—is not a setting in which Jesus used the saying or even that it is not the setting in which it was originally given. It is possible, at the very least, that Jesus shared the warning against attempting to serve two masters as an independent saying on some occasions and in fuller contexts with illustrations or applications on other occasions.<sup>49</sup> If, in fact, he did so, it would be natural for one who is aware of the broader frameworks in which the warning was made to inform his understanding when it is made without explanation. Here, the context for the

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<sup>48</sup> Compare Matt 25:14–30 and Luke 19:11–27.

<sup>49</sup> Snodgrass, "Parables about Money," 412.

statement is broader in Luke 16 than it is in Matthew 6. Rather than uproot Luke 16:13 from its relationship to the parable, as some scholars are wont to do, perhaps it is preferable to allow its meaning in the Gospel of Luke to inform one's understanding of the statement's use in Matthew 6:24.

### III. Narrative Arguments for Including the Sayings in Luke 16b–13

Scholars generally agree that the sayings in 16:8b–13 are authentic to Jesus and are accurately preserved by Luke,<sup>50</sup> so the principal controversy is whether they are applied by Jesus to the Parable of the Shrewd Steward. Of course, many recognize the close relationship between the parables contained in chapters 15 and 16.<sup>51</sup> Since this material is related, it is arbitrary to expunge 16:8b–13, or any part of it, without compelling reasons and evidence for doing so. Certainly, the burden of proof lies squarely upon those who assert that Luke appends this material out of context and, whether carelessly or intentionally, creates a false impression of Jesus speaking the words as the text relays them. Nebulous objections like, “It does not sound quite right to me,” are hardly a firm and logical basis for impugning the integrity of Luke's work, even implicitly.

While the usual arguments for disallowing the sayings are not persuasive, the narrative features of Luke's Gospel and the immediate context of the contested verses strongly favor their

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<sup>50</sup> “In spite of divergent interpretations there is at least consensus amongst exegetes that we are dealing with authentic pronouncements of Jesus.” du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?,” 1–2; Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 796; see, e.g., Fletcher, “The Riddle of the Unjust Steward,” 15, 19; Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 28–29.

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., Larsen, “Den kloge godsforvalter”; Yap, “Three Parables of Jesus,” 207–23; J. L. Story, “Twin Parables of Stewardship in Luke 16,” *American Theological Inquiry* 2.1 (2009): 105–120; Lee, “The Wasteful Steward,” 520–528; Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 795–796; Stanley E. Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13): Irony Is the Key,” in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl, and Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 139.

inclusion with the parable. For instance, the author clearly indicates that Jesus articulated the sayings. Moreover, he states that the Pharisees heard and reacted to the sayings, and the Gospel's readers would have been prepared to receive an explanation.

*Luke Identifies Jesus as the Speaker*

By attaching the sayings to the parable without a clear indication of changing speakers between 16:1–8 and 16:9–13, Luke invites readers to let the material inform their reading of the story.<sup>52</sup> In 16:1, he identifies Jesus as the speaker when he writes ἔλεγεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητάς (“and he said also to the disciples”). The antecedent person is Jesus, who is mentioned by name in 14:3 where Luke introduces a long teaching section only interrupted by brief and obvious narrative commentary describing discrete actions, identifying speakers, or otherwise setting the stage for his readers (see, e.g., Luke 14:4, 6–7, 12, 15). In 15:1–2, for example, he alerts readers that Jesus's series of parables regarding lost valuables was directed toward the Pharisees and scribes.

Having affirmed that Jesus is still speaking in 16:1, Luke then recites the parable and the sayings without narrative interruption until he inserts another brief orientation in 16:14 to inform readers of the Pharisees' reaction to Jesus's teaching. Having heard all that Jesus says, both the parable and the sayings, they scoff at him.<sup>53</sup> Luke then announces a return to Jesus's teaching in 16:15 with the words καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς (“and he said to them”).

Luke continues this pattern in chapters 17 and 18. In 17:1, he indicates that he is recounting the words of Jesus with an introductory clause that essentially parallels the clause in

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<sup>52</sup> du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm,” 15; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 595.

<sup>53</sup> Bruehler, “Reweaving the Texture,” 53.

16:1—εἶπεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητάς αὐτοῦ (“and he also said to his disciples”). This introduction precedes a narration of Jesus’s interaction with ten lepers (17:11–19) and a brief challenge by the Pharisees (17:20–21), and then Luke introduces yet another teaching discourse with εἶπεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητάς (“and he said to the disciples”) in 17:22. The author was transparent when inserting his own narrative comments, and he used constructions like the ones in 16:1 and 16:15 to specify when Jesus was speaking (see also Luke 18:1, 9, 14, 16).

Acknowledging that the sayings in 16:8b–13 are authentic to Jesus does not go far enough. There are no substantial text critical arguments against the authenticity of the passage, and Luke presents them in precisely the manner one would expect if he wants readers to ascribe them to the mouth of Jesus specifically as an explanation of the Parable of the Shrewd Steward. Among other things, Luke is careful and consistent in distinguishing his own reflections, which tend to be narrative rather than interpretive, from words he attributes to Jesus. Because the sayings are embedded between two clear indications that Jesus is speaking (16:1, 15),<sup>54</sup> exegetes should not dismiss or translocate them without a truly compelling reason.

One can ostensibly argue that Luke, the careful historian, displaces the material without noting the transference, but this is tantamount to alleging either sloth or deception and such an allegation cannot be credited without evidence.<sup>55</sup> Even if, assuming *arguendo*, Jesus did not verbalize the explanation on the precise occasion described in Luke 16, objectors would still

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<sup>54</sup> “Verse 14 is one of the two places (the other is in v. 1a) in chapter 16 where the narrator himself speaks.... The narrator opens with ἤκουον δὲ ταῦτα πάντα in order to connect what follows to the previous section.” Bruehler, “Reweaving the Texture,” 54.

<sup>55</sup> See Earle E. Cairns, “Luke as a Historian,” *BSac* 122.487 (1965): 220–226; A.T. Robertson, “Luke’s Method of Research,” in *Luke the Historian in the Light of Research* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 42–60; I. Howard Marshall, “Luke as a Historian,” in *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 53–76; “The sloppiness interpreters generally see in Lk. 16.8b–13 would be rather uncharacteristic of this author.” Schellenberg, “Which Master? Whose Steward?,” 264.

have the burden of demonstrating that he did not give the explications in relation to the same parable on other occasions because they would still be directly relevant if he did so. Of course, there is no indication or evidence of this either, but it is at least as plausible as, and arguably more plausible than, speculations that Luke did not understand the parable, draws upon completely disconnected material, and presents it as if it is spoken by Jesus on the occasion he describes. It is more likely that Luke would have omitted the parable altogether if he did not understand it himself or was troubled by it.<sup>56</sup>

*The Pharisees Hear “All These Things”*

A second linguistic feature, one that seemingly has not been noted heretofore, ties Luke 16:1–8a and 16:8b–13 together as an unbroken unit spoken entirely by Jesus in the context Luke provides. In 16:14, Luke notes that the Pharisees hear “all these things” (ταῦτα πάντα). At a minimum, the phrase seems to plainly include the content of 16:1–13. If some portion of those verses is not included, it would have been clearer to insert the narrative orientation regarding what the Pharisees hear earlier in the passage than Luke actually does. As the passage stands, an inclusive reading of ταῦτα πάντα in 16:14 is supported by Luke’s use of the phrase, and others closely akin to it, as a narrative summation throughout his Gospel.

The employment of this phrase in the Gospel of Luke prepares readers for its inclusive use following the Parable of the Shrewd Steward. For example, Luke describes the birth of John and the circumstances of his naming. When Zacharias’s speech is restored and he blesses God, “all these sayings” (πάντα τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα) are published, and the people remember them and wonder about John’s future service to God (1:65). There, the phrase clearly encompasses the

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<sup>56</sup> Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 130.

events described in 1:59–64. Similarly, in Luke 2:19, after the shepherds visit Jesus in Bethlehem and relay the angelic message they received about him, “Mary kept all these sayings” (Μαρία πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα). The phrase there incorporates the events described in 2:16–18. Lastly, in Luke 2:51, after Mary and Joseph found Jesus among the teachers in the temple, Luke wrote that Mary again kept “all these sayings” (πάντα τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα) in her heart. The phrase there summarizes the events described in 2:48–50. Luke also uses ταῦτα πάντα in 24:9 to summarize the report of various women to the apostles following the resurrection of Jesus.

In light of the way ταῦτα πάντα functions throughout his Gospel, it would have been highly unusual for Luke to insert narrative interpretations or interpolations in 16:8b–13. In fact, if he did so, it would be a singular exception, and in the absence of strong evidence that it is such an exception, exegetes should accept the aggregating force of the phrase and read 16:1–13 as one coherent unit. Luke’s use of ταῦτα πάντα in the chapters preceding the parable helps his readers to receive the material that immediately precedes it, and their inclination to do so is confirmed by its deployment thereafter. This deduction seems all the more necessary since the author provides no way of distinguishing the source of material in 1–8a from 8b–13.

#### *Luke’s Readers Anticipate an Explanation*

Luke’s readers are conditioned to expect an explanation or application of Jesus’s parables. For instance, the Parables of the Children in the Marketplace (Luke 7:31–35), the Two Debtors (Luke 7:41–48), and the Sower (Luke 8:4–15) are given and then immediately explained by Jesus. So, too, are the Parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–13), the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13–21), the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8), and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14). To the extent that the meanings or

applications of some parables would not have been immediately clear, Luke often records Jesus's explications.<sup>57</sup> Apparently, both Jesus and Luke expect the audience to be guided and constrained in understanding the parables by this supplemental material. This is arguably the most obvious reason for including it.

Of course, Luke did not record an explanation from Jesus for every parable. In some instances, he presented the parables as if the meanings were so clear to Jesus's hearers that no direct application was given or requested (see, e.g., Luke 20:9–19). For example, the Parables of New Cloth on Old Garments and New Wine in Old Wineskins are not explained (Luke 6:36–39). Neither is an explicit interpretation given for the Parables of the Fig Tree (Luke 13:6–8), the Wedding Banquet (Luke 14:15–24), or the Minas (Luke 19:11–27).

On the whole, though, Luke commonly introduces parables by announcing them as parables (see, e.g., Luke 5:36; 6:39; 8:4; 12:16; 13:6; 14:7; 15:3), and he includes Jesus's explanations immediately thereafter. Where he does so, the reader is not free to impute a different meaning to Jesus as narrator. As Fletcher concedes regarding 16:9, “No one can question that, as the text stands, this saying is represented as being a direct (and emphatic, καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω) commentary by Jesus on the parable.”<sup>58</sup> Proper exegesis, then, must account for the narrator's interpretations or explanations, and 16:9–13 “are meant to provide an application.”<sup>59</sup> This is all the more evident where they are imbedded within the text.

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<sup>57</sup> “Luke is fond of ending a parable or a series of pronouncements of Jesus with a summarising comment.” du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?,” 15; see, e.g., Luke 14:28–33.

<sup>58</sup> Fletcher, “The Riddle of the Unjust Steward,” 19.

<sup>59</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh, Revised edition. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 176.

In summation, there are “no textual markers to signal a break” within the pericope,<sup>60</sup> but there are compelling reasons to respect its continuity. For instance, Luke clearly identifies Jesus as the speaker in 16:1b–13, Luke states after the sayings that the Pharisees heard “all these things,” and Luke’s first readers would likely have anticipated an explanation to the potentially confusing story. The text itself supports reading the story and the ensuing explanations as “a continuous narrative” and a “literary unit.”<sup>61</sup> Like other parables, it is not to be pulled apart and dissected *ad nauseum*. It is intended to illustrate and guide hearers toward one or more principles, and sincere readers are expected to grasp its thrust. To ensure that they can grasp it, Luke includes Jesus’s sayings. Ignoring these applications leads readers more decidedly toward eisegesis than exegesis.

#### IV. The Constraining Force of the Sayings in Luke 16b–13

Some exegetes acknowledge that the decision to include or exclude the sayings can materially influence one’s interpretive course.<sup>62</sup> As Klyne R. Snodgrass summarizes the import when discussing 16:9, in particular, “Decision at this point—for or against the inclusion of v. 9—is crucial, for if this verse is included, the direction and intent of the parable are set. If only vv. 1–8a are included, most will argue that the parable is about wisdom in the eschatological crisis. If vv. 1–9 are accepted, most will accept that the parable has something to do with the wise use of material resources in view of the eschatological crisis.”<sup>63</sup> Fletcher, also writing specifically

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<sup>60</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 595.

<sup>61</sup> Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 130.

<sup>62</sup> Lawrence M. Friedel, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *CBQ* 3.4 (1941): 347; du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?,” 15.

<sup>63</sup> Snodgrass, “Parables about Money,” 411.

about 16:9, opines that the attempt to find meaning independent of the parable “has betrayed interpreters into some very implausible exegesis.”<sup>64</sup>

Reckoning with the sayings while interpreting the parable does not resolve every hermeneutical challenge, but it narrows the field of scholarly debate and discourages further dalliances into the implausible or highly speculative. For instance, the subsequent sayings reinforce the traditional idea that the parable emphasizes the steward’s actions and attitudes rather than those of the master. Also, they demonstrate that understanding the message Jesus intended to convey is not ultimately contingent on the particular socio-economic context of certain ancient peoples.<sup>65</sup>

*The Parable Emphasizes the Steward Rather than the Master*

At least three of the parable’s internal features highlight the steward’s prominence. First, only his conduct is described in relative detail. The story introduces the rich man in preparation for the reckoning, and he briefly reappears for the reversal and unexpected ending, but the rich man remains in the background while the key action unfolds. In short, “[n]othing in the story suggests that the rich man should be viewed negatively or that he is the focus or that he is concerned with regaining honor,” and, “[f]rom space alone it is clear that the steward and his actions are the primary focus.”<sup>66</sup>

Second, the depiction and descriptions of the steward draw the reader’s attention to him. His character is described, but his master’s is not. The steward has “squandered” (διασκορπίζω)

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<sup>64</sup> Fletcher, “The Riddle of the Unjust Steward,” 20.

<sup>65</sup> While Loader proposes a novel “christological” reading of the parable, he acknowledges that the force of the sayings favors the traditional reading. Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue,” 519.

<sup>66</sup> Snodgrass, “Parables about Money,” 413.

his master's goods (16:1). He has engaged in clandestine financial transactions, presumably at his master's expense (16:3–7), and Jesus specifically designates him “the unrighteous steward” (16:8a).<sup>67</sup> Jesus, as the parable's narrator, sets the stage with the master receiving the bad reports and confronting the steward, and he concludes the story with the master's commendation, but nothing in the story clearly commends or condemns the master's morality.

Third, Luke includes only the servant's inner thoughts. The inner monologue is a feature Luke includes rather sparingly in his Gospel, and it is almost exclusively reserved for drawing special attention to key figures in Jesus's parables (see, e.g., Luke 12:16–19, 42–46; 15:17–19; 18:4–5).<sup>68</sup> If the emphasis of the parable is supposed to be the master's change of heart, one would naturally expect more insight into his thinking, but there is no indication that Jesus gives it and, in any case, Luke does not record it. Instead, he invites his readers to share in the steward's intimate thoughts.<sup>69</sup> Because more detail and emphasis is provided for the servant's thinking, it is difficult to conceive that readers would naturally think that either Jesus or Luke intend to emphasize the master and his thinking. Indeed, there is a change in the master's perception of the steward, but there is no indication that the master repents of his intended action. Instead, there is every indication that the steward's change of mind immediately influences his conduct.

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<sup>67</sup> Some exegetes read this reference as a genitive of subordination describing the realm of the steward's work and meaning, essentially, “the steward over unrighteousness.” See, e.g., Hans Kosmala, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward in Light of Qumran,” in *Studies, Essays and Reviews: New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 17–20; Richard Dormandy, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?,” *RB* 109.4 (2002): 522; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 593. However, most scholars understand it as an attributive genitive describing the steward's character. See, e.g., Thurén, “The Unjust Steward,” 113–115; Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 620; Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward,” 218–219; Larsen, “Den kloge godsforvalter,” 180; Ireland, “A History of Recent Interpretation,” 316.

<sup>68</sup> Philip Sellew, “Interior Monologue as a Narrative Device in the Parables of Luke,” *JBL* 111.2 (1992): 239; Michal Beth Dinkler, “‘The Thoughts of Many Hearts Shall Be Revealed’: Listening in on Lukan Interior Monologues,” *JBL* 134.2 (2015): 384–385.

<sup>69</sup> Scott, “A Master's Praise,” 182.

Despite the parable's seemingly clear emphasis on the steward, some assert that it actually stresses the master and his attitudes. For instance, Kloppenborg, who labels the parable "The Dishonoured Master," contends that the master is on trial in the court of public opinion once the allegations of the steward's wrongdoing come to his attention, and the master's only real option under the circumstances is to promptly dismiss the steward without any regard to the veracity of the charges.<sup>70</sup> In his estimation, the steward is a sympathetic figure rather than a wrongdoer who forfeits the privileges of his position.<sup>71</sup> Kloppenborg acknowledges that "[t]he dominant line of scholarly interpretation focuses upon the prudence of the steward," but he argues that the driving force impelling the account forward is the master's honor and social standing.<sup>72</sup> Notably, he dismisses the relevance of 16:10–12.<sup>73</sup>

Dormandy agrees with Kloppenborg that the master is the key figure in the parable and posits that the account should be known as "The Parable of a Rich Man Converted."<sup>74</sup> He observes that the master is introduced first in the story and his attitude surprisingly changes therein.<sup>75</sup> Dormandy even suggests that the master is "on the road to conversion."<sup>76</sup> In reaching this unique conclusion, though, he infers pivotal extrinsic details. For example, he claims that the master "had a ruthless acumen for increasing his riches" and that terminating the steward's

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<sup>70</sup> Kloppenborg, "The Dishonoured Master," 489.

<sup>71</sup> Kloppenborg, "The Dishonoured Master," 491.

<sup>72</sup> Kloppenborg, "The Dishonoured Master," 477, 488.

<sup>73</sup> Kloppenborg, "The Dishonoured Master," 475.

<sup>74</sup> Dormandy, "Unjust Steward or Converted Master?," 515.

<sup>75</sup> Dormandy, "Unjust Steward or Converted Master?," 515–516.

<sup>76</sup> Dormandy, "Unjust Steward or Converted Master?," 516.

service is a “tyrannical abuse of power to which any hope of justice is sacrificed.”<sup>77</sup> This scathing portrait prepares the way for what Dormandy describes as “a change of heart” that leads the master to praise the servant for wasting his goods whereas he had previously terminated him for doing so.<sup>78</sup>

This position is unpersuasive because it hinges upon reading critical details into the text and discounting the restraining force of 16:8b–13. According to Dormandy, “At first [the sayings] appear to relate directly to the parable and to the steward himself, but there are problems with this understanding.”<sup>79</sup> Despite granting that the bulk of the story focuses on the steward, he raises three brief objections in resisting the force of the concession, but he does not fully explore them. First, he suggests that 16:10–12 should not begin with a phrase about faithfulness if the verses pertain to the steward because the steward has been unfaithful. Second, he indicates that the parable does not raise the moral issue of trustworthiness. Third, he questions whether the steward, who is commended in 16:8a as shrewd, can be condemned as unfaithful in 16:10–12.<sup>80</sup> After briefly noting his objections, Dormandy avers that the sayings apply to both the rich man and the steward.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Dormandy, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?,” 516–517.

<sup>78</sup> Dormandy, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?,” 518.

<sup>79</sup> Dormandy, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?,” 523.

<sup>80</sup> These objections seem to suggest that Jesus presented the steward as a perfect model, but he specifically identified the steward as unrighteous. Clearly, then, he was not commending everything about the steward. Rather he was calling attention to the steward’s emphasis upon securing his future once his departure became imminent. Consequently, it does not necessarily follow that the measures the steward took to curry favor with human debtors would be directly useful for citizens of God’s kingdom in carrying favor with those who could receive them “into the eternal tabernacles” (16:9).

<sup>81</sup> Dormandy, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?,” 524–25.

Reading Luke 16:1–13 as one unit guards against the marginal positions adopted by Kloppenborg and Dormandy. The parable itself presents the servant as its main character, and the explanatory material that follows cements this understanding. For instance, the allusion to making “friends to yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteous” in 16:9 parallels the steward’s intentions and actions in seeking to make friends through his use of money in order to secure a home for himself following the termination of his stewardship in 16:4–7. The steward is the one accused of being unfaithful in his service and is specifically labeled unrighteous by Jesus (16:1, 8a). The parallels between 16:1 and 16:8 and the sentiments of 16:10 regarding being faithful and unrighteous are unmistakable. Moreover, the allusions to unfaithful handling of money and the hindrance of future opportunities in 16:11–12 reverberate loudly with the steward’s circumstances. The parallels are so strong and compelling that they could hardly be accidental. Luke seemingly presents them as Jesus’s sayings amplifying the message of the parable specifically so that the audience will miss neither the emphasis on the steward’s thoughts and conduct nor the application to their own lives.

Furthermore, despite Kloppenborg’s and Dormandy’s reservations, the subsequent explanations fit the parable very well. The story does address themes of faithfulness and trustworthiness. The very concept of stewardship mandates consideration of those themes, and the immediate announcement that the steward is accused of wasting his master’s goods indisputably brings them to the fore. While money and its proper management are the natural context for the story, the sayings show that Jesus’s ultimate considerations are spiritual. “Eternal tabernacles” and “true riches” and service to God are rightly in view (16:9, 11, 13).

In Luke’s narrative, the parable is directed to Jesus’s disciples, who are likely to relate more readily to the steward than the master, and the steward is the “center of gravity of the

story.”<sup>82</sup> While the steward would have been in a more privileged and comfortable position than Jesus’s hearers, he is, ultimately, a servant who depends upon others for maintenance and security. This accounts for the exigency he experiences when he learns of his termination. His livelihood depends on serving others; the only question is whom he will serve, and this is precisely the position Jesus’s listeners would have been in and that Jesus crystallizes for them in 16:13.

*The Parable’s Meaning is Not Ultimately Dependent on Ancient Contexts*

A good deal of scholarship has endeavored to unpack the specific social and economic contexts in which Jesus’s story unfolds.<sup>83</sup> While the parable itself does not disclose the details, some exegetes suggest that the key to its understanding lies therein,<sup>84</sup> and they have promulgated and bandied about a number of theories. For example, in his quest to find a plausible context for the master’s praise, John Goodrich proposes an approach that hinges on rent remission practices in Roman farming, but he does not demonstrate that such practices have immediate relevance for either Jesus’s audience or Luke’s first readers.<sup>85</sup> Cultural and historical research certainly can supplement and enhance understanding of the interpretation the text itself gives, but they cannot rightly displace it. Opinions readers may have about the propriety of Jesus’s use of the parable

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<sup>82</sup> Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 797.

<sup>83</sup> See, e.g., Ernest van Eck, “Realism and Method: The Parables of Jesus,” *Neot* 51.2 (2017): 173–182; Marulli, “‘And How Much Do You Owe...?’” 199–216; Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master,” 474–495; Goodrich, “Voluntary Debt Remission,” 547–566.

<sup>84</sup> “To understand the parable adequately, it is necessary to reconstruct the world of the listener, and this includes not only ‘religious’ but social and economic aspects.” Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master,” 486–487.

<sup>85</sup> Goodrich, “Voluntary Debt Remission,” 553–563.

are distinct from acknowledging what the text says and purports to mean, and Luke 16:8a–13 provides the window through which readers are called to view the story.<sup>86</sup>

The two most likely explanations for omission of the parable’s precise social, economic, or historical dynamics are that (1) even though the intricate details are critical to understanding and applying the story, Jesus’s original audience knew them well and without explanation or (2) the intricate details are not ultimately necessary because a basic understanding of the circumstances is sufficient for the audience to grasp and apply the parable as Jesus, and subsequently Luke, intended. For instance, the text does not disclose precisely how the steward initially squandered the master’s goods. In the immediately preceding Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), Jesus explains that the younger son squanders his father’s earnings on riotous living (15:13), and the older son accuses him of devouring the proceeds with harlots (15:30). No similar insights are given regarding the steward’s waste, ostensibly because this is an unnecessary detail in the Parable of the Shrewd Steward, and as du Plessis notes, parables do not generally include unnecessary details.<sup>87</sup>

In order to rein in the imaginative but sometimes far-fetched approaches to the parable, it is best to “approach this as a story and not go beyond the text because that would give rise to too much speculation.”<sup>88</sup> This is all the more advisable since the story, while striking and unique, does not present a very complicated scenario. “Much is made by commentators of what kind of debt is at issue, how large the owed sums are, how large the reductions are, and why the debtors

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<sup>86</sup> “[T]he immediate co-text of these verses is critical for their interpretation....” Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 595.

<sup>87</sup> “Unless Luke himself has missed the point, it is reasonable to assume the parable contains the necessary information for the reader to understand it.” Ireland, “A History of Recent Interpretation,” 318; du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?,” 5.

<sup>88</sup> du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?,” 8–9.

write them in their own hands. These details are secondary. The important factor is that the amounts and reductions are sufficiently large that the steward has a claim to being received out of gratitude by the debtors.”<sup>89</sup> As the story is preserved, Jesus provides enough information for readers to perceive the shrewdness of the steward’s actions, and this is the information vital to their understanding.

While speculations about the socio-economic particulars in which the parable unfolds can offer helpful insights for modern readers regarding the cultural dynamics underlying the plot, they should not be allowed to drive one’s interpretation. For example, a modern reader might naturally think the master’s primary concern was financial. The steward’s financial waste may be the primary consideration, but scholarship along the honor and shame continuum has persuasively argued that a part of the master’s injury, perhaps a significant part in ancient Semitic societies, was reputational.<sup>90</sup> Western readers today would likely miss such nuances without the aid, whether direct or indirect, of scholarly investigation.

Still, the precise details of the master’s commendation are not dispositive in ascertaining the parable’s meaning. At least theoretically, he could commend the steward because he appreciates his roguery, or he could commend the steward because the steward somehow rescues him from shame.<sup>91</sup> The master’s motivation is not explained.<sup>92</sup> Yet, Jesus states that the master commends the steward specifically because the steward has done wisely. This is dispositive in his teaching and in Luke’s Gospel, so the basic meaning of the parable does not depend on

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<sup>89</sup> Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 143.

<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., Yap, “Three Parables of Jesus,” 207–223; Landry and May, “Honor Restored,” 298–300; Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master,” 474–495.

<sup>91</sup> Yap, “Three Parables of Jesus,” 217–218; Landry and May, “Honor Restored,” 301–305.

<sup>92</sup> Thurén, “The Unjust Steward,” 141.

details extraneous to the text. In this case, preoccupation with obscure theories is a distraction. While the background data can help elucidate the story's meaning, it simply cannot drive its meaning because the meaning is imbedded within the parable itself.

Some might argue that an intensely narrative critical approach to the parable ignores its socio-economic context, but this is inaccurate. Rather, the approach recognizes that the kingdom message Luke places on the lips of Jesus is not constrained or controlled by a specific economic context. The basic dynamics of the steward's circumstance are largely relatable across cultures and transcend the narrow social contexts emphasized by some scholars. According to Long, the precise reasons that the steward's efforts to curry favor are effective in the parable are secondary to the fact that they are effective; he gains the debtors' favor by giving them a monetary break, and this helps to secure his future.<sup>93</sup> This much is plain from the text, confirmed by Jesus's comment in 16:8b, and amplified and applied in 16:9–13. Consequently, the fog that would naturally accompany Jesus's use of a rogue is lifted by the sayings of 16:8b–13.

## V. Conclusion

The Parable of the Shrewd Steward (Luke 16:1–8a) is unique to Luke's Gospel, fascinating for its roguish main character, and compelling for its call to decisive action and absolute commitment to God. Unfortunately, a good deal of exegetical industry concerning the story distracts from its simple structure and profound message. By discounting the subsequent sayings without any firm textual bases for doing so, scholars have opened the floodgates to wide-ranging and imaginative ideas that do not necessarily have a close nexus with the passage and often diverts readers from the pericope itself. While the course of discussion is unlikely to

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<sup>93</sup> Long, "Getting by with a Little Help from My Friends," 172.

change radically in the short-term, and some questions about the passage may never be resolved to the satisfaction of many, this article is an effort to rein the discussion in by demonstrating that the text does not leave the field of reasonable interpretations unbounded.

Before one goes foraging through the annals of history and archives of archaeology to uncover extra-textual material that is not immediately relevant to first century Jewish audiences, one should ask the most fundamental question regarding the parable: What does the passage itself reveal about its meaning? The scholarly community can more closely achieve the overarching purpose of bringing clarity to the text and its meaning by respecting the pericope's integrity and interpreting the story in light of its close relationship with Jesus's sayings in 16:8b–13. On close examination, the scant arguments for ignoring these applications are often conclusory and generally unpersuasive, and there are compelling reasons for interpreting the parable in light of them. Among other things, (1) Jesus is the source of the sayings, (2) the Pharisees hear them before responding to the parable, and (3) Luke's readers would have anticipated an explanation to such a unique story.

The subsequent sayings are “interpretive of the parable.”<sup>94</sup> Displacing them invites unnecessary and distracting questions, and that invitation accounts for some of the parable's more exotic interpretations. Its meaning is not hopelessly lost, and there are concrete textual and narrative bases for limiting the range of the scholarly discussion and debate. By way of illustration, this article has demonstrated that the sayings in 16:8b–13 militate against readings that would identify the master as the story's main figure or make the parable incomprehensible without the particulars of an extratextual ancient context.

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<sup>94</sup> Anderson, “Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost,” 739.

Jesus's listeners and Luke's first readers may not have been nearly as mystified by the Parable of the Shrewd Steward as modern exegetes sometimes suppose. At bottom, the parable is a call for radical reevaluation of one's priorities. However, to the extent that readers were perplexed, and to the extent that readers today are baffled, the explanatory sayings in Luke 16:8b–13 are included to corral wild imaginations. One might conceivably receive the story as involving a roguish steward who behaves unjustly throughout his tenure, a reformed rogue who sees light of day when confronted with the consequences of his former misdeeds, or even an innocent servant upon whom an exigency was thrust because of unfair accusations.<sup>95</sup> Whichever direction one takes in reading the story, the sayings draw readers back to its central message—in Jesus's kingdom, citizens must handle worldly wealth wisely in order to secure admission into their subsequent abodes. According to him, that basic message has both earthly and eternal ramifications.

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<sup>95</sup> See, e.g., Marshall describes this as the “traditional interpretation.” Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 614; Derrett, *Law in the New Testament*, 48–77; Goodrich, “Voluntary Debt Remission,” 563–566; Scott, “A Master's Praise Luke,” 180–182; Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 48; Dormandy, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?,” 515–517.