The Unrighteous Manager


“Flee Self-Righteousness and Come Home”

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“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.”

“I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

Robert Frost, Death of a Hired Man, 1905-6

Their graves are their homes forever,
their dwelling places to all generations,
though they have called lands by their own names.

Psalm 49:11
Abstract of this paper

- The conventional interpretation of the parable of the unrighteous manager, that it’s a one-point positive parable commending shrewdness, with the issue of dishonesty being ‘neither here nor there’, has a long pedigree.
- But it has for very long also caused some measure of embarrassment and nervousness for commentators and Bible-teachers alike on account of its seeming to use an instance of fraud as a positive example of shrewdness.
- Also, on this conventional interpretation, it’s hard to resist the conclusion that v.9 seems to be suggesting justification by works – shrewd behaviour now will get you to heaven.
- Convoluted circumlocutions are regularly employed in an attempt to rescue the parable for evangelical doctrine.
- In addition, a one-off parable about shrewdness has no such context in the surrounding material, and seems thoroughly out of place.
- In this paper we suggest an alternative interpretation that, as far as we know, hasn’t been considered before. We offer it for peer review.
- First and foremost we argue that the surrounding context of the parable, including its immediate predecessor, the parable of the lost son, includes prominent condemnation of the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and the religious establishment generally.
- We argue that the parable of the unrighteous manager fits securely within this framework, not least on account of the self-justifying nature of the manager’s conduct, and of the explicit mention of self-justification in the ensuing teaching verses.
- We then show that a straightforward way of rehabilitating v.9 is to suggest replacing the translation ‘eternal’ with ‘of-the-age’. Whilst we admit that ‘eternal’ is far the commonest translation of the Greek word in the NT, we argue that at its heart the word means ‘pertaining to the age in question’. Very frequently the age in question is the eternal age-to-come, and so ‘eternal’ is then right. But if the age in question is this age, as here, it can and should be rendered differently: ‘of-the-age’ or, in context, ‘of-this-age’.
- So v.9 then becomes a deliberately sarcastic comment about the ways of the world, which may work here in this world, but which (by implication) will not avail for eternity.
- Additionally, we demonstrate in an appendix a remarkable parallel between this parable with its ensuing application, as Luke tells it, and Psalm 49, which is about the futility of trust in worldly riches. In this psalm those riches are ‘eternal’ in two ways (only): first, in the pompous imaginations of the rich and mighty, and secondly, and ironically, in the grave (Sheol) to which the pompous rich will inevitably go to dwell for ever.
- On the strength of these suggestions the parable becomes a negative one, giving an example of worldly attitudes of trust not in God but in worldly mammon, which by implication is condemned along with the self-righteousness that accompanies it.
- Overall, the purpose of the parable is to deprecate self-righteousness, just like the ending of the parable of the lost son, and just like Jesus’ explicit application-teaching in v.10-15.

1 He (Jesus) also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. 2 And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ 3 And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ 5 So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6 He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ 7 Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ 8 The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

10 “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? 13 No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

14 The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. 15 And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

[See notes on the text shortly for NIV variations, and see Appendix E for the Greek text.]

– with a few significant amendments, as suggested in this paper, and some original Greek words for reference

1 He (Jesus) also (καί) said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager (οἰκονομον), and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. 2 And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ 3 And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, they may receive me into their houses (οἰκους).’ 5 So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6 He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ 7 Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ 8 The master commended the unrighteous (ἀδικιας) manager because he acted cannily/craftily (φρονιμως). For the sons of this age (αἰωνος τουτου) are more canny/crafty (φρονιμωτεροι) in [dealing with] their own generation (γενεαν) than the sons of light. 9 And I (και έγω) tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness (μαμωνα της ἀδικιας), so that when it fails they may receive you into the of-the-age dwellings (τας αἰωνιους σκηνας).

10 “One who is faithful (πιστος) in a very little is also faithful (πιστος) in much, and one who is unrighteous (ἀδικος) in a very little is also unrighteous (ἀδικος) in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful (πιστοι) in the unrighteous (ἀδικω) wealth (μαμωνα), who will entrust (πιστευσει) to you the true [riches]? 12 And if you have not been faithful (πιστοι) in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? 13 No servant (οἰκετης) can serve (δουλευειν) two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise (καταφρονησει) the other. You cannot serve (δουλευειν) God and mammon (μαμωνα).”

14 The Pharisees, who were lovers of money (φιλαργυροι), heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. 15 And he said to them, “You are those who justify (δικαιοουντες) yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”
Notes on the ESV, NIV and Greek text

These notes, together with the earlier abstract and our suggested emendations of the text above, should be sufficient to give the reader the main gist of our proposal. The ensuing paper is an extended treatment of our thesis. Appendix A is a suggested explanation of our take upon v.9; Appendix B is a treatment of Psalm 49; Appendix C is our response to an early critique from a friend and colleague; Appendix D is a brief treatment of 16:16-18; and Appendix E is the full Greek text.

v.1 The ‘also’ (missing in NIV) connects the parable strongly to the previous material.

v.3b There is a clear note of self-pity and pride in the manager’s refusal to work menially or beg.

v.4c ‘receive’ (NIV has ‘welcome’) is identical to ‘receive’ in v.9. We think this is significant. ‘people’ (ESV and NIV) is not present in the text: it’s just ‘they’, as in v.9 (although NIV turns an active clause into passive there). Because of the clear parallel between these verses, ‘houses’ (v.4) clearly links with ‘dwellings’ (v.9), although it’s a different word there. The ‘they’ of v.4 and v.9 are clearly sons of this age, just as the manager and the master are.

v.8 We think there is no justification for allegorising ‘master’ as Jesus Christ or God; clearly in this parable the master is a ‘son of this (very worldly) age’. The commendation of the manager by the master is a commendation of a son of this age by a son of this age.

v.8 The word translated ‘dishonest’ here and twice in v.10 in both ESV and NIV is actually the word for ‘unrighteous’. But the same word is translated ‘unrighteous’ (ESV) in v.9 and v.11, where NIV has ‘worldly’ there. Clearly the nature of the manager’s behaviour is indeed dishonesty, but given the actual word is ‘unrighteous’, we think this strengthens our suggestion that the main point of the parable is to deprecate self-righteousness.

v.8b ‘for his shrewdness’ (ESV) is actually ‘because he acted shrewdly’, as in NIV. We agree that ‘shrewdly’ is a not unreasonable rendering of the Greek adverb, but we don’t agree with commentators who re-render it as ‘wisely’, this being only an accommodation to the conventional interpretation. Context requires ‘shrewdly’ or ‘cannily’ or ‘as per the mind-set in question’, namely a very worldly mind-set. Likewise ‘more shrewd’ in next sentence.

v.8b ‘of this world’ (ESV and NIV) is actually ‘of this age’. We consider this to be very significant. The adjective translated ‘eternal’ in v.9 is has exactly the same root as ‘age’. They cannot but be related, and in this paper this lies behind our suggested re-rendering of the adjective in v.9.

v.8b NIV’s ‘people’ (twice) is actually ‘sons’, as ESV.

v.8b ‘dealing with’ (ESV and NIV) is entirely missing from the Greek text. It’s ‘in their own generation’ – ‘their own generation’ equals, of course ‘the sons of this age’. NIV has: ‘in dealing with their own kind’.
v.9  Re. ‘unrighteous’, and re. ‘receive’, see above. ‘And I’ is strong. ‘wealth’ is the word sometimes translated ‘mammon’ as also in v.11.

v.9b  A principal suggestion of this paper is that the word translated ‘eternal’, from the same root as ‘age’ (v.8b), should be re-rendered as ‘of the age’ (i.e., ‘of this very worldly age’). Then v.9 should be considered as a calculatedly sarcastic acknowledgement by Jesus that the ‘you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours’ maxim of the world does indeed work generally speaking – but only in this world; it will have no justifying effect for the next.

v.10  We consider it to be of crucial importance that this verse sets ‘faithful’ against ‘unrighteous’ (see on v.8 above), and sees them as opposites. Given, as we believe, that the Reformation maxim, ‘justification by faith alone’, is at the centre of the biblical gospel, this parable, we consider, fits squarely within this framework. [NB, we must remember that all the ‘righteous’ words and all the ‘justify’ words have the same underlying Greek root]. It’s the person of faith / trust / belief / faithfulness (any of these translates the Greek root) who is the person of justification / righteousness in God’s sight. It’s the unrighteous, unfaithful person who indulges in self-justification and remains unjustified in God’s sight – both as exemplified by the sons of this age in the parable, and in the attitude of the self-righteous Pharisees (v.15). Unrighteousness is by unfaithfulness, but justification (righteousness) is by faith. On the strength of this observation, the parable is a negative one, not a positive one. “Don’t be self-justifying like this man, or like the Pharisees” is the message of the parable.

v.11  It seems crystal clear to us that the unrighteous manager of the parable exemplifies the one who has ‘not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth’. Clearly, therefore, the manager will not be ‘entrust(ed)’ with ‘the true (riches)’, i.e. with justification in God’s sight. Nor will the Pharisees. Nor will anyone who is not a person of faithfulness (trust) in the justification God supplies in Christ. How, then, we ask, can this be a positive parable commending the unrighteous manager? Exactly the same applies to v.12-15.

v.11b  ‘riches’ (ESV and NIV) is actually not present in the text; it’s just ‘the true’.

v.13  Although we argue that the principal contrast in this and surrounding passages is between self-righteousness and justifying faith, it’s clear that love of money, and thus trust in the security of worldly riches, is one key aspect of the self-justification of the Pharisees and of the world in general.


v.15  The ‘men’ of this verse clearly are the ‘sons of this age’ (v.8) of the parable.

v.15a  The word ‘justify’ comes from exactly the same root, of course, as the righteousness words. See on v.10 above.

v.15b  The ‘abomination’ is principally, of course, self-righteousness, although mammon as a means to that end is in mind too.

“Read the Bible in context”, we say – this is the touchstone of all faithful and competent Bible interpretation; and we mean every relevant context – historical context, literary context, Bible-time-line context, grammatical context, social and cultural context, and so on; and above all else, the ‘Bible-plot-line’ context, or to give it another name: ‘Christ’; “Christ in all the scriptures” was the motto of our European Reformation forebears, after they had recovered from obscurity the principle that the entire Bible-plot-line points to Christ, and that every passage has a place in that objective in leading us to him. This is bread and butter to all Bible teachers, and we should never tire of hearing this principle reiterated. Under pressure of time and the ‘tyranny of the urgent’, it’s all too easy to forget or neglect the exercise of examining context when we approach a passage, even the immediate context of the surrounding material.

This paper is an exercise in seeking to do immediate (and wider) context work on one perplexing Bible passage: the parable of the unrighteous manager in Luke 16. On a straightforward reading it seems as if Jesus is telling a story of someone who is dishonest, but that the story implicitly commends the dishonest practice (v.9: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings”). The way that many commentaries deal with this is to say that we shouldn’t push parables too far, that they generally have only one point (with which we agree), and that what is being commended here is shrewdness and being savvy to the ways of the world, rather than dishonesty; dishonesty is neither here nor there, it is said. Preachers and teachers regularly follow this approach. But one can’t help but sense the embarrassment felt by such dutiful expositors, as they wriggle and fidget their way nervously and defensively through their exposition, when, following all the commentators and all their colleagues and forebears, they struggle to come to terms with an unrighteous person doing an unrighteous thing becoming the model for commending shrewdness.

We are going to suggest an alternative approach. We wince as much as others when we find ourselves having to (in some sense) defend the unrighteous behaviour of an unrighteous man. We can’t help but ask, “Is this really what Jesus Christ intended by this parable? Is it really a parable simply and only advocating worldly-wise shrewdness? Do we really have to turn a blind eye to the dishonest manager’s self-serving fraud?” The ensuing study explores this conundrum.

I, currently writing this, and one very good old friend, both of us ordinary jobbing Bible-teacher-pastors with no pretensions to greatness, sat down together over lunch in 2008 and thrashed out together our misgivings about Luke 16, longing to find some better approach to the parable which would not cause us and others so much embarrassment and grief. The following, with contributions from both of us, is the result of our couple of hours of
deliberations. After five years of reflection, we remain convinced. Our key was, and is, context.

First, might we ask, “Is there a context in the surrounding text that invites teaching on shrewdness?” We can’t find any. The predominant concern of Luke over the preceding chapters has been the claims of Jesus and the question of whether people would recognise him for who he is, and also the clear distinction between those who accept him and those who reject him; the kingdom of God (the rule of God in the hearts and lives of saved sinners), and the repentance, trust and obedience to the gospel required to enter it; the sinfulness of the current generation, and especially the pride, hypocrisy and self-justification of the religious establishment; also the cost, responsibility and reward of discipleship. In passage after passage the crucial question in Luke’s mind has been, “Jesus – what do we make of Jesus? Will we accept Jesus in repentance and faith, and by his grace and mercy enter his eternal kingdom? Or will we reject Jesus on account of our besottedness with this world and with the ephemeral niceties it has to offer?” And exactly the same goes for the ensuing chapters too. If this parable is really about stewardship then it surely stands alone; there is no surrounding context that leads us to expect to find such a message here; it seems so out of place. A parable, supposedly teaching shrewdness, suddenly appears unexpectedly in a long section of Luke that has nothing else at all fitting in to such a category, and follows with a strong connecting ‘and’ immediately upon three parables about the joy of finding the lost (and with another such to follow) – it’s hard to resist the conclusion that this conventional interpretation is not on the right track. The interpretation seems so ‘out of context’.

So we are suspicious, and not least because amongst all this teaching about the eternal kingdom, the wiles of the earthly kingdom are (on this reading) used as an example to be commended! Worldly riches are hardly the object of commendation in the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and Tax Collector, the Rich Ruler, and the Zacchaeus narratives, etc.; and we can’t find a counter-example elsewhere. Indeed, in the very verses following our parable, love for worldly riches (which is the weakness of the dishonest manager) and love for God are decidedly placed in opposition to one another (16:13-15): the former, though ‘exalted among men’, is ‘an abomination in the sight of God’ (v.15b).

The only person commending the dishonest manager in this parable is the rich man, but he is one of the ‘people of this world’ (v.8). And in v.10ff, dishonesty, apparently commended in v.8, is the opposite of faithfulness and trustworthiness. To try and say that it’s shrewdness being commended here, and that the dishonesty is ‘neither here nor there’, when, immediately following, dishonesty is condemned so comprehensively, seems to us to be strained and to stretch credulity. Likewise suggestions such as taking v.10 as demonstrating that the manager has been faithful in little things through his dishonesty is, frankly, utterly barmy. It can only mean the opposite given the pharisaical context; v.10-13 are saying, “That was an awful story. But you, don’t be like this”. And the suggestion that
the manager, being more shrewd than the sons of light (by the standards of this age), makes the sons of the world better than the sons of light, and hence the manager is a positive example, is similarly to be rejected.

We wondered if perhaps one key to rehabilitating this parable is to stop trying to see it as a positive parable, commending something (in which case the only candidate for commendation is the dishonest manager and his ‘shrewdness’ – hence the conventional interpretation of this parable); and instead to see it as a negative parable, showing us what not to do. If so, then the dishonesty of the manager is an example of worldly behaviour, set as the antithesis of godly behaviour. Could it be that this parable presents a dreadful warning against how the world behaves? At first sight, it would seem that, no, we cannot read the parable this way. After all, the behaviour exemplified by the manager gets one into heaven, it seems (v.9)! Except that in v.11 such behaviour keeps you out of heaven! Oh dear! Can we find a way out of our predicament? Well, we have a suggestion. And so we return to our examination of context.

The reader is perhaps wondering what we are going to do with the apparent works-righteousness of v.9: “Be shrewd now and it will have rewards in eternity”? We shall indeed address this difficulty, and to do so we shall do some internal textual work ‘in context’ within the parable itself, but not just yet. Of greater, indeed supreme, importance is that we seek to set the parable within the wider context of its external surrounding material. What has just happened in the narrative is that, in a well-known and much more often taught parable, a privileged elder son has spurned his father’s love.

The parable of the lost son is unusual in that it’s a double parable, with two sections and two main points. If we take the first section, 15:11-24, on its own, it’s the last in a series of three parables about the joy of finding what was lost, with the theme of repentance ringing loud throughout. The ‘prodigal’ son, utterly undeserving, but confessing his waywardness and unworthiness, and repenting before his father, is accepted unconditionally by the father – he is saved by grace. The father exacts no payment, nor puts the son to work as a servant; out of his unconditional love he gives the lost-and-found son the very best in a spirit of joy and celebration, instead of punishing him with the worst. That is the first point of the parable.

But it continues with a contrasting elder son (v.25-32). The point of this second section is no longer the return of the younger son; It’s the refusal of the father’s love by the elder son. The contrast is between the one son who is utterly undeserving and is justified entirely by the father’s grace, and the second son who believes he has always been good enough for the father, scorns the father’s love to another, and refuses to accept it for himself. Spurning his father’s constant care for him, and taking for granted his privileged position, he seeks to justify himself. The ghastly attitude of self-justification, in contrast to the grace of the father, is the second point of the parable.
The Parable of the Unrighteous Manager — “Flee Self-Righteousness”

Intriguingly, there is a hint—no, much more than a hint—of the same idea in the first of the series of three parables, that of the lost sheep: ‘there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance’ (15:7). There is, of course, more than a touch of calculated sarcasm in Jesus’ concluding words here (some of them, ‘over one sinner who repents’, are repeated verbatim in the second parable, making it clearly parallel), and it is plainly Jesus’ intention that we see in them a condemnation of the self-righteousness of the religious establishment. Jesus is associating with tax-collectors and sinners (v.1), and the Pharisees and scribes typically hate it (v.2) and are, also typically, muttering in the background (cf. 16:14; 19:7, and cf. the earlier 5:27-32). These three parables are directed explicitly at these religious leaders, clearly with the intention that they should realise Jesus is attacking them, and they are still part of the audience during Jesus’ telling of the parable of the dishonest steward and the following paragraphs, of which more soon. It must surely be beyond much doubt that Jesus’ (and Luke’s) intention here is to show the stark contrast between justification by grace alone through faith and repentance alone, and the self-justification, the self-righteousness, not to forget the pride and hypocrisy, of the religious establishment. Indeed, the point is made explicitly in 16:14-15 after the parable of the unrighteous steward: ‘The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”’

Our theory, then, is that although the first three parables, in Luke 15, do have a clear theme of the joy of finding the lost, all four of these parables are also directed against the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and other religious leaders. In the first two this is clearly implied in the sarcastic, “over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” – one can almost smell a pair of apostrophes surrounding the word ‘righteous’. This attack on the establishment is ratcheted up as the parables progress: it’s still implicit but even more detectable in the parable of the lost son, where the elder son clearly demonstrates what the ‘righteous persons’ (as they estimate themselves to be) are really like. When we come to the fourth parable in 16:1-9, although it is explicitly directed towards the disciples because he is teaching them what not to be like (this is clear in the application-teaching of v.10-13), it’s now, not previously, that the listening Pharisees ridicule Jesus, laughing him to scorn – very clearly indeed they are getting the point, and are liking it not one single little bit; no more, in fact, than they liked seeing Jesus associating with tax collectors and sinners in 15:2.

Additionally, now that we have seen all four parables to be directed against the Pharisees, it’s a not unreasonable suggestion that the two texts, 15:1-2 before the first parable, and 16:14-15 after the fourth, act as ‘bookends’ for this section, preserving its unity as a whole. Of course, the word ‘lost’ is used here to describe repentant sinners who were lost but are found, as also Zacchaeus in 19:10 (“the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”): the single lost coin, the single lost sheep, and the prodigal son were ‘lost’ and were ‘found’ (15:24,32). But in reality there are other lost people who are ‘lost-but-not-found’ in these
parables: these are the resentful, self-justifying elder son and the unrighteous, self-congratulatory manager (and his sycophantic master) – oh, and also the ninety-nine ‘righteous’ (actually self-righteous) persons who ‘need no (or so they think) repentance’. These lost-but-not-found actually cannot be found – the Son of Man did not come to seek and save them. It’s our firm belief, therefore, that all four parables contain the same theme of targeting the self-righteous, and we find it very hard to understand how the ‘shrewdness is good’ theory ever came to see the light of day – its advocates, we suggest, simply have not done their ‘context’ work – they have read the parable in utter isolation from context.

The parables of the ‘lost-and-found’ in Luke 15, and the subsequent ridicule by the Pharisees in Luke 16 after the parable of the unrighteous manager, are not the first times Luke has recorded the self-justifying hubris of the establishment. Back in Luke 10 a lawyer, despite his head-knowledge of the Law, is seen by Jesus clearly to be a hypocrite – he has no ‘heart-knowledge’ of what it means to love his neighbour: ‘But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”’ (10:29). We infer from this that he has a very restricted view of whom it is he should love. Jesus’ response is the parable of the good Samaritan, making it clear that his neighbour is anyone in need of love, even when entirely unidentifiable as to ethnicity on account of his being stripped of identifying garments. Other passages also have strong hints of the self-justifying tendencies of many, even if the vocabulary is not so specific. Even Martha in the following narrative account seems to think that extravagant practical service is a meet replacement for sitting listening to her Lord’s teaching. The teaching at the beginning of Luke 13, directed against those who think they are acceptable to God with no need of repentance, certainly falls into this category; likewise the remainder of Luke 13 and much or all of Luke 14. In the parable of the Pharisee and Tax-collector (Luke 18) we see the epitome of self-justification, and it is hardly absent from the narrative of the Rich Ruler in the same chapter. Luke 19 records the muttering against Zacchaeus, who is justified by faith, and the end of Luke 20 highlights the “listen to our lengthy prayers” attitude of those who ‘devour widows houses’ (and Jesus rubs the point home by his contrast between the rich and the poor widow immediately after). We could add other examples – self-justification is certainly a notable theme of Luke’s narrative.

Luke 16:14-15, quoted above, concluding the parable of the dishonest manager and its highly relevant ensuing paragraphs, are, we aver, the clincher that rules out the traditional interpretation of the parable and points in the opposite direction. The parable, in line with this principal thrust of Luke’s narrative, is about self-justification. Here is a story, told to the religious establishment, of someone dishonest, who misuses his master’s possessions but who so manipulates things that he gets justified in the eyes of others – clearly Jesus illustrates the “you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours” attitude by which worldly people manipulate others to their own advantage and thus accumulate earthly wealth. Clearly this is meant to be another direct stroke at the Pharisees (who are listening, and who love money) for the way they treat the things of God but seek to be justified by human activity.
The manager is not, positively and commendably, the model of shrewdness, but is, negatively and reprehensibly, the model of self-justifying contempt for mercy and grace. We strongly suggest that the commendation of the rich man by his employer in the parable is not meant to show that the actions of the dishonest manager are commendable in God’s sight, nor even that they represent, parabolically, a commendable shrewdness. The employer is one of his own – he is a child of his worldly age, of ‘this generation’. It’s meant to show the exact opposite. This is not a positive parable about something positive to emulate; it’s a very negative parable about an abomination in the sight of God to be avoided at all costs.

But what is it that Jesus’ hearers are to avoid? Dishonesty? Clearly that’s true, but it’s not the thrust of the parable. What we are being told to avoid – the one main point of the parable – is the religiosity that justifies itself, and manipulates situations to try to convince ourselves that our sin won’t result in disqualification. Following straight on from the parable of the prodigal son, it drives the same point home. Here are religious people who justify themselves. The unrighteous manager is like the elder brother. Both contrast with the prodigal (who represents the ‘sinners’ whom Jesus was partying with), who, though sinful and yet repentant, was welcomed and restored entirely by grace.

Let’s flee from justifying ourselves, either by religion or by human manipulation. Jesus sees right through both and isn’t fooled. He justifies neither – only those who receive it from him as a free gift. This, we suggest, is the principal application of this and the other parables and narratives we have considered. The parable, then, when considered in broad context, very far from commends the unrighteousness or shrewdness of the manager; it does the opposite: it deprecates all such worldly, self-justifying conniving. The only dwellings this will get us welcomed into are the ephemeral ones of this world which will certainly not endure into heaven – ephemeral in reality, that is, although such dwellings are, no doubt, ‘eternal’ in the imaginations of the unrighteous hoarder of worldly riches; oh, and certainly there are eternal dwellings for the unrighteous – in the grave (see our treatment of Psalm 49 below).

Luke 16:1-15 is a parable, a negative one, and as such has one and only one point: flee self-justification. By repentance and trust in Jesus, come home, come to your eternal home, where by grace alone through faith alone you will be accepted by the God who justifies you. We acknowledge that our treatment of v.9 (see below) is unusual, especially regarding the translation ‘eternal’ – indeed, we’ve never seen it proposed anywhere else. Nor has anyone connected the parable with Psalm 49 (see below) before, so far as we know. We admit to never having heard any exposition of this parable other than the ‘be shrewd’ one. Preaching the parable on our understanding, using our suggested alternative translation within v.9 (see below), would be difficult, for fear of appearing novel. Preaching it using our take upon Psalm 49 might be possible, but it would still appear novel to the many who are aware of the traditional interpretation. Nonetheless, we submit our considerations for peer review.
Appendix A – Dealing with v.9 and other textual issues

NB – We here do some textual work involving the Greek language, without in the least claiming we are top-rate experts therein. We shall explain ourselves as best we can.

There remain a few difficulties with, and interesting observations to be made about, the text of the parable. Above all, v.9 is enigmatic on any reading. On the conventional interpretation, on the basis of the mention of ‘eternal dwellings’ it looks as though worldly-wise craftiness gets you to heaven. This of course is so at odds with the teaching of justification by faith alone that we have to reject it – but it’s a severe problem if we think the parable commends canny dealings with the world. The ‘they’ of v.9 are the worldly friends, the ungodly of this age, whose backs we have scratched so that they will scratch ours. The habitations they will welcome us into are hardly going to be in heaven, and yet the verse seems to say they are. Shortly we shall offer a couple of suggestions as to how v.9 need not be such a problem on our interpretation of the parable, as suggested in this paper. But we would stress that it’s a very great problem indeed for the conventional stance on the parable. Such treatments of this parable as we have come across, making it simply and only to commend shrewdness, either seem to gloss over the verse altogether, or make it to offer some kind of ‘reward for faithfulness’ – but this is not what the verse says. If God were the rewarder we could embrace it perhaps, but here it’s the ungodly who are welcoming the crafty conniver, and the only homes they have got to welcome him into are their own earthly dwellings. But we wish to move away from the conventional interpretation, so we are not so troubled.

What then do we make of v.9? Well, we wouldn’t want arrogantly to think we can solve the remaining difficulty in a trice, but we are going to make a suggestion, with an appropriate degree of provisionality, and submit it here to the test of peer review.

One suggestion is regarding the word translated ‘eternal’ (‘aiōnios / αἰωνιός’) in v.9. Our key is a simple noun earlier in the text which should translate as ‘age’ (‘aiōn / αἰών’ – the Latin ‘aeterna’ also means ‘age’), but this is obscured in ESV and NIV, which unaccountably translate it ‘world’. It’s the Greek word which gives us the English word ‘aeon’ (or ‘eon’), meaning an age – usually a long period of time, as in expressions like ‘down through ages past’, or ‘he’s a child of his age’, or ‘in this age or in the age to come’, or even ‘it’s taken ages’. It occurs in v.8 in the expression ‘the sons of this age’. Clearly this refers indeed to this age, and not to the age to come – not, that is, to the eternal age. Related to this, of course, is the expression in the same sentence, ‘in their own generation’, meaning, in its context, ‘in the generation of their own age’. Clearly the parable is demonstrating how people of this age conduct themselves towards one another.

But there’s another occurrence in the passage of this word, except it’s in its adjective form rather than the noun. There isn’t such an equivalent adjective in the English language [actually there is – ‘aeonian’ – but it’s arcane], but the Greek adjective means, we think,
something like ‘pertaining to the age’, or ‘respective/appropriate/relevant to the age’, or the adjectival phrase ‘of-the-age’, where the age being referred to is the age in question as per the context. Very often in the biblical use of this word the age being referred to in context is the eternal age, in which case the word must mean just that – ‘eternal’. Because there are so many occasions where the Greek adjective clearly does mean eternal, including in the Septuaigint translation of the Old Testament, it seems that ‘eternal’ has become the default translation. And thus in our parable, the Greek adjective is the word translated, in all the translations, as ‘eternal’ in v.9 – ‘the eternal dwellings’. But does it have to be so? In context, is it not ‘this age’ that is the age in question? Should not v.9 be translated, ‘... so that when it fails they may receive you into the of-the-age dwellings’ – the dwellings of this age, that is, because this age is the age in question? This, we suggest, makes much more sense. Despite the preponderance of instances where ‘aiōnios/αἰωνιος’ is, quite rightly, translated ‘eternal’, there are some instances where the word certainly refers to the present or previous ages of this world. ‘aiōnios’ occurs in Romans 16:25, ‘the mystery kept secret for long ages’ (NIV: ‘hidden for long ages past’ – actually: ‘in aiōnios times’, and this cannot in context mean ‘in eternal, age-to-come times’); and in 2 Timothy 1:9 (parallel Titus 1:2), ‘before the ages began’ (NIV: ‘before the beginning of time’ – actually: ‘before aiōnios times’). Interestingly, these loose ESV/NIV translations fail to render the word aiōnios at all, and seem to assume a theological position on ‘time’ – that time is an aspect of creation – that we think, though possible, can’t absolutely be justified biblically.

Additionally, it’s worth noting that houses decidedly of-this-age have already had a mention in the parable: the manager has craftily schemed to get himself invited into his beneficiaries’ houses. We grant that the word for ‘houses’ in v.4 is not the same as for ‘dwellings’ in v.9, but both are clearly ‘this-age’ dwelling places. On this understanding, v.9, then, is a (not un-typical) sarcastic remark turning the screw on the Pharisees and any who are minded to invest in crafty, worldly, self-justifying manipulation. “Yes, certainly”, Jesus is saying here, nodding towards the Pharisees as his prime example, “you butter the world’s bread and there’s a sporting chance they’ll butter yours. Manipulate your way to worldly security. Crafty conniving is just how the world behaves” – but (implied here, and clearly stated in the ensuing words to the disciples), “it shall not be so amongst you”.

Given that there are these two occurrences of the ‘aeon’ word in the passage, one a noun, the other an adjective, but clearly from the same root, and given that the aeon in question everywhere else in this parable is the unrighteous worldly age, we fail to understand how the adjective in v.9 was ever translated ‘eternal’. There’s another noun-adjective pair that operates in this passage very similarly: this is the pair ‘unrighteous’ and ‘unrighteousness’. v.11 refers to the ‘unrighteous mammon’, and v.9 to the ‘mammon of unrighteousness’. Surely these expressions are synonymous. Thus we aver that the ‘aeon’ adjective in v.9 operates in exactly the same way as the ‘aeon’ noun in v.8. The adjective means ‘of-the-age’.
Why, then, we ask, was ‘aiônios’ ever translated ‘eternal’ in this parable? Well, in Appendix B we demonstrate that it could possibly mean ‘eternal’, but referring not to eternity in heaven, but eternity in the grave, in Sheol; or even referring in a figurative way to a very long time here on earth (see below). But to translate it ‘eternal’, intending to mean that the eternal dwellings are heavenly ones, goes hand in hand with the notion of this parable being a positive one (and even then there remains the theological difficulty with v.9 that entails some sort of ‘heaven-as-a-reward’ doctrine). But the parable can only possibly be read this way if one thinks that ‘eternal dwellings’ is (a) the correct translation, and (b) means ‘heaven’ and not ‘Sheol’. So why do commentators and preachers run so readily to this standard interpretation? The answer, we suggest, is that they run to it with preconceived notions as to what the parable’s message is. This exemplifies one dreadful mistake continually made by expositors – the mistake of approaching a Bible passage having already decided what it means, either because of unthinkingly embracing an inherited interpretation (as here), or (worse) out of sheer prejudice. But pre-deciding what a passage means is no substitute for careful contextual work. In our present case we suggest the long-standing, automatically assumed ‘be shrewd’ interpretation has stultified good exegesis and obstructed taking a good hard look at the passage in context.

Incidentally, the verb translated ‘justify’ in v.15 has exactly the same root as all the ‘unrighteous’ words in the passage – albeit the latter all have the ‘un-’ prefix. To be ‘unrighteous’ is either to be unrighteous in conduct or to be unrighteous in standing before God. How interesting, then, that the only people the manager ends up justified before are the sons of this age – he certainly will not be justified before God. This parable must be about the enormity of self-justification. It’s also interesting that the words translated ‘dishonest’ in v.10 are exactly this word ‘unrighteous’, and that the opposite to ‘dishonest/unrighteous’ in this verse is ‘faithful’. Who is justified before God? Answer: the person of faith. Who remains unjustified before God, albeit justified before men? Answer: the unrighteous/dishonest person.

Another textual issue is the meaning of the Greek adverb ‘phronimōs / φρονιμως’ translated ‘shrewdly’ (NIV) or ‘for his shrewdness’ (ESV, nounifying the adverb). It has been suggested that ‘wisely’ would be an appropriate rendering, thereby further seeking to justify the conventional interpretation, sanitising the scheming mind. We think that generally speaking the adverb perhaps can be rendered ‘wisely’ (see paragraph below) if the context justifies it – the word is related to a Greek word for ‘mind’. But only if the context does justify it, and we think not here. If, as we suggest, the root noun phronēma / φρονημα essentially means (in the Hebrew thought-world) something like ‘mentality’ or ‘mind-set’ or ‘way of thinking’, then this mind-set might be indeed wise with the wisdom of God, or it might be a worldly mind-set ‘wise’ with the unrighteous ‘wisdom’ of the world. This, we think, is the case here – hence the translations render it such as ‘shrewdly’ (in a worldly sense), or, better, we suggest, ‘cannily’ or ‘craftily’ or ‘cunningly’; what is important is that a dishonest, worldly mind has devised a cunning scheme for manipulating others. The word ‘phronimōs/
φρονιμως is a Greek word, but the Greek language is everywhere used in the NT by Hebrews or (as probably in Luke’s case) by Gentiles thoroughly steeped in the Hebrew mindset. We must not read NT Greek as if it were written by Greeks. Luke certainly understands fully the Hebrew way of thinking.

Phronēma/φρονημα generally may mean wise with the wisdom of God (e.g. Romans 8:5b,6b), or it may be foolish with the folly of man (e.g. Romans 8:5a,6a). Like so many words, only the immediate context supplies the precise meaning. In Mark 8:33 the word is used with a decidedly worldly meaning! Sophia/σοφία is the perfectly ordinary word for wisdom, but sophia is absent from Luke 16. Phronimōs/φρονιμως, the adverb in v.8, must in context, then, mean something like ‘cannily’ – he has cannily (and cunningly) put his worldly mind to the task of bettering his position before men. Note that v.8 (as also the whole passage) goes to some length to emphasise the ‘this-age-ly’ nature of the operations of worldly man – thus the clause ‘the sons of this age are more canny in their generation than the sons of light’.

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Appendix B – Psalm 49

But we have an alternative suggestion to make regarding the enigmatic v.9. We have argued that it cannot mean ‘eternal’, at least in the sense of the eternal dwelling place awaiting God’s people at the return of Christ on the day of judgement. And so we have wondered whether ‘eternal’ is really the right translation, and have suggested ‘of-the-age’, or, in context, ‘of-this-age’ as an alternative that fits much better. But there’s possibly an alternative way of looking at v.9, we suggest, retaining the word ‘eternal’, but in the deliberately sarcastic sense of ‘the dwellings the sons of this age have built for themselves, and think are theirs for ever, where they are safe for ever, taking no thought for the real eternity, nor for the God of eternity to whom they must account for their unrighteous lives’; whereas actually the only ‘eternal dwellings’ they have got are their graves (Sheol). Now, where on earth do we get that strange idea from? Well, come with us to Psalm 49. We wonder if there is an echo of this, or rather more than an echo, in our parable. Here it is:

Psalm 49

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.

1 Hear this, all peoples!
   Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
2 both low and high,
   rich and poor together!
3 My mouth shall speak wisdom;
   the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.
4 I will incline my ear to a proverb;
   I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre.
5 Why should I fear in times of trouble,
   when the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me,
6 those who trust in their wealth
   and boast of the abundance of their riches?
7 Truly no man can ransom another,
   or give to God the price of his life,
8 for the ransom of their life is costly
   and can never suffice,
9 that he should live on forever
   and never see the pit.
10 For he sees that even the wise die;
   the fool and the stupid alike must perish
   and leave their wealth to others.
11  [LXX]  Their graves are their homes forever,
    [Hebrew]  Their inward thought was that their homes were for ever,
    [these are alternative readings – it doesn’t matter which for our purposes]
their dwelling places to all generations,
    though they called [or: have called] lands by their own names.
12  Man in his pomp will not remain; 
    he is like the beasts that perish.
13  This is the path of those who have foolish confidence; 
    yet after them people [or: and of those after them who] approve of their boasts. Selah
14  Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; 
    Death shall be their shepherd, 
    and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. 
    Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell.
15  But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, 
    for he will receive me. Selah
16  Be not afraid when a man becomes rich, 
    when the glory of his house increases.
17  For when he dies he will carry nothing away; 
    his glory will not go down after him. 
18  For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed, 
    —and though you get praise when you do well for yourself—
19  his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, 
    who will never again see light.
20  Man in his pomp yet without understanding
    is like the beasts that perish.

Note the remarkable coincidence of themes in this psalm and in our parable:

- Justification – the futility of self-justification (v.7b,18a,20a,12a, ‘pomp’), the impossibility of being justified by another (v.7a,18b), but God alone justifies (v.15,8-9).
- Futile trust in worldly riches – the rich and mighty have no eternal advantage over the poor and lowly (v.2,6,10).
- Dishonesty (v.5); earthly houses/dwellings (v.16b,11); eternal destiny – the grave (‘Sheol’, v.14-15) for the worldly but God’s eternal acceptance (v.15, ‘he will receive me’) for the righteous.
- The ‘mind-set’ of the world (v.20, ‘without understanding’) over against a godly mind-set (v.3).
- The facile imagination of the unrighteous that they are secure in their riches for ever (v.11-14a,c,16-17,19-20), over against the real security of the righteous in eternity (v.14b-15).
• The worldly winning the praise of others (v.18); the upright are the vindication of the ‘sons of light’ (v.14b, ‘in the morning’), over against the eternal darkness for the unrighteous (v.19b, 14-15, ‘Sheol’).

• ‘You cannot serve God and mammon’ – an apt summary of the psalm.

We humbly submit that the likenesses are so striking between Psalm 49 and the parable of the unrighteous manager that it’s not beyond possibility that Jesus was thinking of the psalm when he told the parable, fully intending that his audience (the disciples, with the Pharisees listening in) should recollect the psalm’s severe warning against worldliness. Now that may be speculative, and perhaps needs further evidence before it can stand certain.

But nonetheless, here is a clear biblical example, deriving from the psalmist’s actual experience of the world, of how self-righteous, self-congratulating people do think they have their ‘eternal’ dwellings, and have them here; “we’ll live for ever”, they think, fooling themselves into believing their self-made security here will last and last. Oh yes, the psalmist says, pricking the self-righteous bubble, it’ll surely last for ever, but not here – the only eternal home they will have is their grave in Sheol. If, then, Psalm 49 is read as a biblical ‘control’ upon the parable, then the conclusion is clear: yes, Jesus is being intentionally sarcastic in Luke 16:9, and intends to say, in effect, “There are only two places where the dwellings of the worldly-unrighteous are eternal, and those are (a) their facile, pompous, self-aggrandising, self-justifying imaginations, and (b) Sheol, the grave”. And this fits brilliantly with our take upon the parable.

Ultimately it doesn’t matter whether the aeon-adjective in v.9 be translated ‘of-the-age’; or ‘eternal’, as long as in the latter case ‘eternal’ is taken to mean ‘eternal’ in the worldly imagination and in the grave. We remain convinced that the unutterably unrighteous, self-justifying, world-bound pomposturations of the ungodly, to be fled from by the righteous, is the one and only point of this parable.
Appendix C – Our responses to some actual peer critique

Critique – “My concern with your interpretation is that in the verses immediately after the parable Jesus applies it saying that people are to be shrewd (better ‘wise’) in their use of money. So his application doesn’t flow with your thoughts – he does seem to say we should be like the dishonest manager in his wise actions in the light of the future.”

Response – We disagree that ‘shrewd’ is better rendered ‘wise’; if context allows it, then yes, perhaps – but context disallows it here. Your only determining factor here is the circular reasoning entailed by your need to make the parable to be about shrewdness.

You are right to point to the application in v.10-13. It seems to us that there are two chief negative points here:

a. those who are unfaithful in unrighteous wealth don’t get entrusted with true riches, v.11;

b. those who are unfaithful with other people’s wealth won’t be given their own;

c. both of these constitute being dishonest in v.10b, which is what the disciples are NOT to be in v.10a. The application to disciples is to do v.10a (opposite of the manager) and avoid v.10bff (being like the manager).

The fact that the Pharisees are in view in both instances is determined by the connection between v.13 and v.14 (and the obvious similarity between 16:14 and 15:2 – see also 19:7 where muttering people contrast with the absolutely un-self-justifying Zacchaeus). I.e., even though Jesus is talking to the disciples, the listening Pharisees still constitute the negative example of what disciples are not to be like.

The dishonest manager falls into the application category of those who are unfaithful in unrighteous wealth and not faithful in righteous wealth in v.11-12. The contrast is v.10: the disciples are to be faithful in little in order to subsequently be faithful in much.

Critique – “In v.1 we are told that he is now speaking to his disciples (so different audience to Luke 15). The Pharisees are clearly listening in and then become the focus of Jesus’ words following v.14, and also the second parable (that of the rich man and Lazarus). So the flow of the passage is positive teaching to disciples about use of money and then a rebuke to the Pharisees who love money.”

Response – The audience is not different: it’s both the disciples and the Pharisees throughout. When Jesus speaks to the disciples we hardly think the Pharisees aren’t meant to be listening (as you observe), and vice-versa. The only actual positivity about use of money in Luke 16:1-15 is in the traditional interpretation of v.9 (and from the master in the story who is a child of his aeon/age, and who patronisingly affirms the manager). If we leave aside the traditional interpretation, the only positive encouragement to godly use of money is by implication from the specifically negative teaching against worldly use of money (the implication is clearest in v.10a). “Don’t be like that”, Jesus says in v.10b-15. Given this
straightforward observation, how can we see the story of the manager as being positive teaching about use of money? Jesus says “Don’t be like that” after the parable, and thus he must be saying “Don’t be like that”, in the parable; this, we suggest, is by far the most obvious and straightforward take upon it.

Critique – “It’s not unreasonable that the parable illustrates wisdom alone, and the dishonesty is neither here nor there (cf. the unjust judge who is paralleled with God).”

Response – This is undiscerning, surely. (a) Wisdom isn’t the correct category as we have argued. (b) The parable is embedded in material to do with money, love of it, and justifying oneself before men. The content of the parable is all about these things too. How can one say it’s ‘not unreasonable’ that it’s about wisdom only and not about the very thing the whole section very obviously is about?! (c) How can one say that dishonesty is neither here nor there when in v.10b-15 it’s taken very seriously and utterly deprecated?! (d) The unjust judge (18:1-8) is contrasted with God, not paralleled. The message is, “If the unjust judge can distribute his largesse, albeit under duress, how much more will the just God be generous”. (e) It’s following the crowd to say, “Dishonesty is neither here nor there”.

Critique – “I disagree that the manager is contrasted with sons of light – he is presented as better than them but so as to be an example.”

Response – Undiscerning again, we feel. (a) It’s only ‘so as to be an example’ if the traditional interpretation is correct; therefore circular reasoning. (b) Of course the manager is contrasted with the sons of light. More exactly, the sons of this age are contrasted with the sons of light explicitly, but which category is the manager supposed to be in? The sons of this age, of course, so he’s definitely being contrasted with the sons of light.

Critique – “The use of ‘age’ you are running with is so unusual. In the other examples you give (Romans 16:25, 2 Timothy 1:9, Titus 1:2-3) it is used with ‘chronos’ (‘time’) as a composite phrase.”

Response – We’ve acknowledged that our translation in v.9 is unusual – that’s why we’re so tentative! But as you indicate we have shown that there are a number of instances where it is used to translate the word differently from ‘eternal’. We don’t dispute the ‘chronos’ present in the examples we give, but aiōnios is an adjective and will always be composited with some noun or other. In these instances ‘aiōnios’ doesn’t mean ‘eternal’ – that’s all we’re saying. In our three examples indeed it qualifies ‘chronos’, but that’s to be expected given that the contrast there is between times past and the time now (= the gospel age). Interestingly in the Titus passage ‘kairos’ (‘time’ in the sense of ‘the time to do something/occasion/opportunity’) is used in v.3 to describe the now: ‘... at the proper time’ (ESV), ‘... at his appointed season’ (NIV). But yes, our suggested translation is unusual, and we offer it tentatively.
Critique – “The parallels in application between the parable and Jesus’ words mean we are to be like the dishonest manager in some regard; your explanation of how seems very weak to me because it requires a contrast between v.9 and v.10. ‘You might gain dwellings ... but …’.”

Response – But (a) there’s a contrast between v.9 and v.10 in the traditional interpretation, in that v.9 commends dishonesty and v.10 disavows it; the translations think there’s a contrast because there’s a paragraph division there – they can at least spot the disjunction! But remember, we think v.9 amounts to sarcasm, in which case Jesus is not saying “Do this ...” in v.9; rather, he is saying, “Yes, sure, if you act like this, you’ll as likely as not win these very friends (and their spare bedrooms!) which you seek – in this age – so don’t bank on these dwellings lasting for eternity”. If our sarcasm hypothesis is correct, then by implication Jesus in the parable is saying, “Don’t behave like this!” And in v.10ff he is also saying, “Don’t behave like this!” – there is no disjunction at all.

Critique – “But that means Jesus is telling a parable to say: ‘You might do X like this guy but really you should do Y as I am telling you’. I’m not sure of this but would venture that that is a novelty in an extended parable from Jesus; parables generally contain the point to be made, within which is then applied in the ensuing material, rather than acting as extended illustrations which are then negated.”

Response – But the extended point of this extended parable is applied, straight down the line; it’s just that it’s a negative point, and this negative point is illustrated in the parable and then applied, still as a negative point, subsequently (v.10ff). I.e., the parable relates a tale of a thoroughly dishonest (but canny) man, highlighting his dishonesty for all to hear, and then Jesus applies it exactly as is, in v.10-15, just as we keep on pointing out! Perhaps your main objection, then, is simply that you don’t like it being a negative parable. Can’t we cope with it being a negative parable? Novelty is certainly never the arbiter of truth, but then neither is the status quo.

Critique – “More to the point no contrast between v.9 and v.10 is evident grammatically; there isn’t even a conjunction or connecting particle in the text.”

Response – v.10 is about the contrast between faithfulness and unrighteousness, commending the former implicitly, disavowing the latter explicitly. If v.10 is supposed to run straight on from v.9, how on earth are we going to manage to regard ‘unrighteous’-ness in v.9 in a positive light (as the traditional interpretation requires) when in v.10 ‘unrighteous’-ness is regarded in a very negative light? Is that not a contrast between v.9 and v.10?!
Appendix D – Luke 16:16-18 – a brief treatment

16 “The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. 17 But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void. 18 “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

It would be remiss of us in this study not to mention these ensuing verses, given that Jesus’ teaching doesn’t suddenly recommence at v.15 and then terminate at the end of the verse. His continuing speech in v.16 follows straight on. Whether v.15-31 constitute one speech of Jesus, or whether Luke has collected various sayings together, is not an issue for us; but given that Luke has put these verses together, and given that at first sight they may appear somewhat disconnected from the surrounding context, we must at least consider whether v.16-18 make a contribution to our exposition, or at least whether their presence here is consistent with and supports our interpretation. Indeed this is the case, for the following reasons.

In short, we observe that the answers to the question, “Who rules my life?”, and to the question, “Who justifies me?”, are identical – either Christ rules me and justifies me, or I am guilty of self-rule and self-righteousness. These are the questions, essentially the same question, that divide the world and create the conflict between Jesus Christ and his followers on the one hand, and the anti-Christ establishment on the other. Or to put it another way, these questions amount to this one: “Is Jesus of Nazareth the Christ, and thus the full and final fulfilment of all the promises of the ‘Law and the Prophets’, or is he not? And will I accept him as such, and thus worship and obey him as such, or will I not?”

The ‘Law and the Prophets’ (v.16) prophesied God’s redemption of the world by his coming Christ, the new Davidic King (the ‘messiah’ = the ‘Christ’ = the ‘anointed one’). This has been a constant theme of Luke from the outset. Consider (amongst many other references) the angel’s announcement to Mary (1:31-33), echoed in Zechariah’s prophecy (1:69), and the voice of God at Jesus’ baptism (3:22, quoting the ‘messianic’ Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1) and transfiguration (9:35):

Luke 1:31-33, “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

1:69, “... a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.”

3:22, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

9:35, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!”
Suffice it to note that here Jesus is proclaimed as the new, long-promised Messiah. When Christ comes, and repentant people place themselves under his kingly rule, this state of affairs is what the Bible calls the Kingdom of God – the reign of the Saviour-King taking place, not only theoretically, but in actual practice in redeemed lives. The Kingdom of the Messiah, the new Davidic King, has remained central to Luke’s narrative; this is apparent in Luke’s quotations from the ‘Servant’ section of Isaiah in Luke 3:4-6, 4:18-19, and (amongst many other references) 4:42, 7:28, 8:10, 9:27, etc. The Kingdom of God is proclaimed (16:16) in the coming and in the teaching of Christ, and it grows as people, encountering him and observing his life and hearing his teaching, receive him in humility and self-abasement (the opposite of the self-righteous hubris of the religious establishment): they accept him for who he is, repentantly acknowledge their sin and unworthiness, receive his mercy and forgiveness, submit to his kingship, and become members of the growing Kingdom.

But what has this to do with our parable and the ever-present rejection of self-righteousness in the surrounding context? Clearly it has everything to do with it. To reject Jesus is to be self-righteous (and self-everything-else); to accept Jesus as the Christ is repentantly to receive his own justifying grace and to belong to his Kingdom. It’s a useful exercise to compare v.16 with the passages about John the Baptist in Luke 3:1-22 (especially v.7-9 and v.16) and 7:18-35 (especially v.22-23 and v.28-30). It is self-evident that the questions of God’s justifying grace, of acceptance (or rejection) of the Christ, and of the Kingdom of God are all intricately interwoven. Luke 16:17 is no problem: to void the Law of its stated purpose (the guardian to lead us to Christ) is to void the promise of God in Christ, and to void this is to void Christ and reject him. But God’s promise stands firm in Jesus Christ, despite the self-righteous denial of the establishment.

The exact interpretation of the word ‘biazetai/βιαζεται’ (v.16) is much discussed, and we shall not enter that debate here, save to observe that the growth of the Kingdom is far from insignificant – when God acts, he acts to fulfil his promises. And v.18, citing adultery as a case-example of ‘void’-ing the Law (v.17, rejecting it, or emptying it of value) is not out of place either, given that adultery (as a moral issue) is used in scripture as a model of the rejection of God by Israel (e.g. in Malachi), which, though always serious throughout Israel’s history, becomes even more grievous in the rejection of Christ by his contemporaries and ever since.
Appendix E – Luke 16:1-18 – Greek text

1 Ἐλεγεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς ἄνθρωπος τις ἢν πλουσίος ὃς εἶχεν οἰκονομὸν, καὶ οὗτος διεβλήθη αὐτῷ ὡς διασκορπιζόν τινα ὑπάρχοντα αὐτοῦ. 2 καὶ φωνήσας αὐτὸν εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Τι τούτο ἀκοῦω περὶ σου; ἀπόδος τὸν λόγον τῆς οἰκονομίας σου, οὐ γὰρ δύνη ἄτι οἰκονομεῖν. 3 εἶπεν δὲ ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὁ οἰκονόμος· Τι ποιήσω ὅτι ὁ κύριος μου ἀφαίρεται τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ; σκαπτεῖν οὐκ ἰσχύω, ἐπαίτειν αἰσχύνομαι. 4 ἐγὼν τί ποιήσω, ἵνα ὅταν μετασταθῶ ἐκ τῆς οἰκονομίας δεξιώται με εἰς τοὺς οἰκούς ἑαυτῶν. 5 καὶ προσκάλεσαμενος ἐνα ἑκάστον τῶν χρεοφειλετῶν τοῦ κυρίου ἑαυτοῦ ἐλέγεν τῷ πρώτῳ· Ποσὸν ὀφειλεῖς τῷ κυρίῳ μου; 6 ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· Ἑκατόν βατοὺς ἐλαίους· ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ καθίσας ταχέως γράψον πεντήκοντα. 7 ἐπεὶ οὖν ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς ἁδικίας ἐποίησεν· ὅτι οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰωνοῦ τούτου ἁδικοὶ ὑπὲρ τοὺς ὑἱοὺς τοῦ φώτος εἰς τὴν γένεαν τὴν ἑαυτῶν εἰσιν. 8 καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω, ἑαυτοῖς ποιῆσατε φιλοὺς ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἁδικίας, ἵνα ὅταν ἐκλίπῃ δεξίωτα ὑμᾶς εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς.

9 Ο ριστὸς ἐν ἐλαχιστῷ καὶ ἐν πολλῷ ριστὸς ἑστιν, καὶ ὁ ἐν ἐλαχιστῷ ἁδικὸς καὶ ἐν πολλῷ ἁδικὸς ἑστιν. 10 εἰ οὖν ἐν τῷ ἁδίκῳ μαμωνᾷ ριστὸς οὐκ ἔγενεσθε, ὁ ἀληθινὸς τοὺς ὑμίν πιστεύεις; 11 καὶ εἰ ἐν τῷ ἀλλοτρίῳ ριστὸς οὐκ ἔγενεσθε, τοῦ ὑμετέρου τοὺς ὑμῖν δώσει χρήματα. 12 οὔτε οὐ πιστεύεις τοὺς ὑμίν δόσεις, οὔτε τὸν ένα μισήσεις καὶ τὸν ἄλλον ἁγαπήσεις, οὔτε τὸν ἴδιον τοῦ θεοῦ δολεροὺς. 13 οὐδεὶς ὁ θεοῦ δυνατὸς δυσιν εἶναι ἡμῖν θεοῖ μακροθεμενεῖν οὐ γὰρ τὸν ἑνα μισήσεις καὶ τὸν ἄλλον ἁγαπήσεις, ἢ ἐνος ἀνθεξεται καὶ τοῦ ἄλλου καταφρονησει. ὁ δὲ χρυσὸς δολεροὺς καὶ μαμωνᾶ.

14 Ἡκουον δὲ ταῦτα πάντα οἱ Φαρισαῖοι φιλαργυροὶ ὑπάρχοντες, καὶ ἐξεμυκτηρίζον αὐτόν. 15 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· Ὡμείς ἔσται οἱ δικαίοιτες ἐαυτοὺς ἐνπίστει ἡμῶν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ὁ δὲ θεός γνωσκεῖ τας καρδίας ὑμῶν· ὅτι τὸ ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ ὑψηλον ἡμῖν ὑπειραῖτο τὸν θεοῦ. 16 ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφηταὶ ἐν τῇ ἤλιῳ ἀνθρώπου, ὁ δὲ θεός ἐν πάσῃ πασίν ἀνθρώπῳ, ὁ δὲ θεὸς ἐν πάσῃ πασίν ἄνθρωπῳ, ὁ δὲ θεὸς ἐν πάσῃ πασίν ἀνθρώπῳ. 17 Εὐκοπωτερον δὲ ἐστιν τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γην παρελθεῖν ἐν τῷ νόμῳ μιαν κεραιαν. 18 Πας ὁ ἀπολυων τὴν γυναίκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμῶν ἐτέραν μοιχευεῖ, καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμενὴν ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς γαμῶν μοιχευεῖ.
The Parable of the Unrighteous Manager – “Flee Self-Righteousness”

With accents:

1 Ἑλέγεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς· Ἄνθρωπός τις ἦν πλούσιος ὃς εἶχεν οἰκονόμον, καὶ οὗτος διεβλήθη αὐτῷ ώς διασκορπίζων τὰ ύπάρχοντα αὐτοῦ. 2 καὶ φωνήσας αὐτὸν εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Τί τοῦτο ἀκούω περὶ σοῦ; ἀπόδοσ τὸν λόγον τῆς οἰκονομίας σου, οὐ γὰρ δύνη ἔτι οἰκονομεῖν. 3 εἶπεν δὲ ἐν ἐαυτῷ ὁ οἰκονόμος· Τί ποιήσω ὅτι ὁ κύριός μου ἀφαιρεῖται τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀπ’ ἐμοῖ; σκάπτειν οὐκ ἰσχύω, ἐπαιτεῖν αἰσχύνομαι; 4 ἐγνων τί ποιήσω, ἵνα ὁταν μετασταθῶ ἐν τῇ οἰκονομίᾳ δέξωνται με εἰς τοὺς οἴκους ἐαυτῶν. 5 καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος ἑνά ἱκανόν τῶν χρεοφειλετῶν τοῦ κυρίου ἐλέγεται τῷ πρώτῳ· Πόσον ὤφειλες τῷ κυρίῳ μου; 6 ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· Ἑκατὸν βάτους ἐλαίου· ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ καθίσας ταχέως γράψον πεντήκοντα. 7 ἐπείτα ἑτέρῳ εἶπεν· Σὺ δὲ πόσον ὤφειλες; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· Έκατον κόρους σίτου· λέγει αὐτῷ· Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ γράψον ὀγδοήκοντα. 8 καὶ ἐπήνευσεν ὁ κύριος τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἁδικίας ὅτι φρονίμως ἐποίησεν· ὅτι οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου φρονιμώτεροι ὑπὲρ τοὺς ἑαυτῶν ἐγενέαν τὴν ἐαυτῶν ἑαυτῶν ἑαυτῶν ἑαυτῶν ἑαυτῶν ἑαυτῶν ἑαυτῶν ἑαυτῶν. 9 καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω, ἑαυτοῖς ποιήσατε φίλους ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἁδικίας, ἵνα ὁταν ἐκλίπῃ δέξωνται ὑμᾶς εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς.

10 Ο πιστὸς ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ καὶ ἐν πολλῷ πιστὸς ἔστιν, καὶ ὁ ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ ἁδικὸς καὶ ἐν πολλῷ ἁδικὸς ἔστιν. 11 εἰ οὖν ἐν τῷ ἁδίκῳ μαμωνᾷ πιστοὶ οὐκ ἐγένεσθε, τὸ ἀληθινὸν τίς ὑμῖν πιστεύσει; 12 καὶ εἰ ἐν τῷ ἄλλοτρῳ πιστοὶ οὐκ ἐγένεσθε, τὸ ὑμέτερον τίς δώσει ὑμῖν; 13 οὐδεὶς οἰκέτης δύναται δυσὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γάρ τὸν ἐνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἑτέρον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἐνός ἄνθεξεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾷ.

14 Ἡκουσαν δὲ ταῦτα πάντα οἱ Φαρισαῖοι φιλάργυροι ὑπάρχοντες, καὶ ἐξεμυκτήριζον αὐτὸν. 15 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· Ὡμείς ἐστε οἱ δικαιούντες ἑαυτοὺς ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὁ δὲ θεὸς γινώσκει τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν· ὅτι τὸ ἐν ἀνθρώποις ψηλὸν βδέλυγμα ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ.

16 Ο νόμος καὶ οἱ προφήται μέχρι ἱωάννου· ἀπὸ τότε ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ εὐαγγελίζεται καὶ πᾶς εἰς αὐτὴν βιάζεται. 17 Εὐκοπώτερον δὲ ἐστιν τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν παρελθεῖν ἀντὶ τοῦ νόμου μίαν κεραίαν εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς.

18 Πάς ὁ ἀπολυων τὴν γυναίκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμῶν ἔτεραν μοιχεύει, καὶ ὁ ἀπολυωμένην ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς γαμῶν μοιχεύει.