

The Unrighteous Manager

Luke 16:1-15

‘Flee Self-Righteousness’

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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

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ESV is the Bible version used predominantly in this study, but NIV and others are referred to occasionally.

Main study below: 7,800 words

This is **version 7** of this study, posted September 2023

New to this version:

The order of the various components has been altered

Critique of Bailey added.

Paragraphs about ‘*wisdom*’ and Jonadab in 2 Samuel 13;

Former Appendix B on Psalm 49 brought into main study;

Pride/humility material brought into main study from text notes;

Former Appendix B replaced by extensive notes on v. 16-18 (former Appendix F);

Former Appendix F replaced by former Appendix G.

Short Abstract of this Study

The conventional understanding of the Parable of the Dishonest Manager in Luke 16, that it commends shrewdness, notably in the handling of money, has historically occasioned considerable nervousness and strained exegesis, especially in respect of the difficult ‘*eternal dwellings*’ in verse 9. Noting fascinating similarities with Psalm 49, and considering the abundance of teaching against self-righteousness in the surrounding context of the parable, this study suggests that it falls in exactly the same category. It is not a positive parable commending the manager, but a negative parable decrying his crafty self-justification. The enigmatic verse 9, then, is best seen as a deliberately ironic remark, made as a warning to Jesus’ hearers about the ways of the world, which may work here in this age, but which (by implication) will not avail for eternity. The ‘*eternal dwellings*’ of verse 9, for which read ‘of-this-age dwellings’, are the ordinary earthly homes of the streetwise worldly, which may go on for ever in their imagination; or, if they really are eternal, are in Sheol, where they ‘*will never again see light*’.

Long Abstract of this Study

- 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.
- In this study, with one exception, we do not interact much with specific examples of the conventional interpretations, variously nuanced as they are, because critiquing an entirely different exegetical paradigm either negatively or positively is no help in critiquing a new one with which they have little connection. But as a single case study, we examine Bailey’s interpretation.
- The conventional line on the parable 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 relevant context in the surrounding material, and seems thoroughly out of place.
- In this study 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 demonstrate 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 (Psalm 49:14, 19).
- By considering the word rendered ‘eternal’ in all the translations, the difficulty in interpreting 16:9 is resolved by understanding ‘eternal dwellings’ to be referring *not* to heaven, but either to Sheol, or perhaps, more likely, to the imagined homes-of-this-age of the godless rich, which they suppose will go on forever. Jesus’ statement in v.9 is thus a deliberately sarcastic remark, or at least irony.
- Whilst we admit that ‘eternal’ is far the commonest translation of the Greek word in the NT, on account of the extremely frequent phrase ‘eternal life’, 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 of heaven, and so ‘eternal’ is then appropriate. But if the age in question is *this* age, as here, or eternal death in Sheol, it can and should be understood as such in v.9.
- So v.9 then acknowledges that the conniving ways of the world may well work here in this age, but (by implication) will by no means avail for eternal life.
- 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 conclusion of the parable of the lost son, and just like Jesus’ explicit application-teaching in v.10-15.

A Study on Luke 16:1-15 – The Parable of the Unrighteous Manager

It is a truth hopefully acknowledged amongst all worthy exegetes that ‘reading the Bible in context’ is the touchstone, a working definition even, of all faithful and competent biblical exegesis. This study is an exercise in seeking to apply the principle of ‘context’ in one perplexing Bible passage: the parable of the dishonest manager in Luke 16. On a straightforward reading it seems as if Jesus is telling a story of someone who is dishonest, yet which implicitly commends the fraudulent 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 (agreed), and that what is being commended here is shrewdness, especially in the use of money, and being savvy to the ways of the world, rather than dishonesty; dishonesty is neither here nor there, it is said. Preachers regularly follow this approach. But one can’t help but sense the embarrassment felt by such dutiful expositors, as they wriggle and squirm their way nervously and defensively through their exegesis, when, following most of the commentators, they struggle to come to terms with an unrighteous person doing an unrighteous thing becoming the model for commending shrewdness – either that, or they sail blithely through a defence of their favoured paradigm without even acknowledging the problem.¹ More than once, the apparently intractable difficulties of this parable have been said to be impossible to resolve.²

The Traditional Paradigms – a Sample Critique

The proposition of this study is not that other approaches fail to examine context – all make their own claim in this regard, often suggesting the context of discipleship, or the use of money, or foresight and decisive action in crisis. Rather, the context of Luke’s interest in self-righteousness as opposed to grace-righteousness has been overlooked as the context-lens through which this parable makes the most sense. I cannot here argue specifically against all other treatments of the parable. This would be an impossible task, and a largely fruitless one, as the aim of this study is to make an entirely new submission for discussion and peer review. A critique of traditional exegetical paradigms would not in itself make a contribution to any assessment – for or against – of the proposal of this study. But nonetheless, in order to demonstrate that this study and its conclusion does not disconnect itself from standard mainstream approaches, I shall here observe, as an example, how one particular attempt to resolve the difficulties of the parable can be critiqued cogently. My choice is the approach of

¹ David Gooding, *According to Luke* (Leicester: IVP, 1987), 272ff, Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1977), 414ff, E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974), 198ff, and Dale Ralph Davis, *Luke 14-24* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2021), 39ff, are just a few examples. See footnote about Derrett below for some more.

² E.g. R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, tr. John Marsh (NY: Harper, revised edition, 1969), 199. Kenneth Bailey cites the late medieval Cajetan to the same effect.

Kenneth Bailey.³ Bailey is an exception to the usual interpretation that the parable is about shrewdness – he suggests that mercy is the dominant theme. Bailey’s expertise on the subject of ancient near-eastern peasant culture is of great renown, and it is difficult, perhaps foolhardy, to offer a challenge. So with some trepidation, I offer the following analysis, by no means exhaustively.

- Bailey’s encyclopaedic knowledge of the ancient village-peasant world is acknowledged, but given the large sums involved, this parable concerns large-scale farmers in debt, not subsistence peasants. Nonetheless, here it is Bailey’s *application* of his expertise that comes under scrutiny.
- In order to make his main point (see below), he attempts to fill in the perceived gaps in the story by multiple additions. But Jesus told the story as Luke presents it. It is Scripture *as we have it*,⁴ that we hold to be the Word of God, not Scripture ‘enhanced’ by speculative emendations (a decidedly unsafe hermeneutical paradigm). Anyway, textual criticism does not allow much manoeuvre with the text of this parable. The story as Jesus told it is not a brief summary of a supposed real-life scenario. Rather, what we have is a short pithy tale from Jesus’ own imagination (but with deliberate purpose), requiring exegesis ‘as is’, on its own brief internal terms, not as extensively ‘improved’ by Bailey’s multiple conjectures.
- Furthermore, Bailey seems not to consider that an ‘improved’ story may not be reconstructable anyway, as exaggeration beyond the reasonable is not unknown in Jesus’ teaching. For instance, in the parable of the sower, it is known that a 100-fold crop-yield was completely impossible in Jesus’ day, by a sizable factor.
- Bailey disconnects the ‘mammon’ material (16:8b–13) from the parable (16:1–8a), as this derives from different textual sources (he says), and makes a different point from the parable about the use of money. But, again, it is Scripture *as we have it* that is the Word of God, not the individual sources in their original form. Granted, Luke may well have used sources. But our view of Scripture is that he infallibly glued it all together according to his own set purpose under the Spirit’s inspiration. I submit here that the purpose of the mammon material is the same as that of the parable and the surrounding material and belongs with it. All taken together, it asks the searching question, ‘Where, reader, is your confidence? In yourself, your desires, your schemes and the world you construct around yourself, or in your creator-redeemer?’
- Bailey’s essential point from the parable is that the master represents God in his mercy, and that the manager in devising his scheme is throwing himself on the mercy of the master. The parable is therefore about how a disciple should throw himself on the mercy of God. But although one cannot dispute the latter Christian principle, I do dispute that the parable makes the manager-master relationship a model for the disciple-God relationship. How can the master represent God, when essentially the manager controls and manipulates the

³ In Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 86-118; revisited in Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (London: SPCK, 2008), 332-342.

⁴ Or, rather, in its original autographs.

master by his devious scheming? Our Reformation-heritage doctrine of the sovereignty, aseity and impassibility of God will allow no such conclusion.⁵

- In fact, in the parable, all the players are ‘of this age’ – but God is not! We do not know what motivated the master to commend the manager’s actions, for Jesus does not include this in his story, and ‘gap-filling’ is unsafe exegesis as already argued. But if we were provisionally to seek to supply the ‘deficiency’ as our minds might conceive it, then it’s not difficult to imagine a scenario whereby the master is not *in his own heart* commending the manager at all. On such a conjectured state of affairs, the master in the parable, having been caught out and manipulated by the manager, does the only thing he can to save face in the public eye – he outwardly, but only outwardly, commends the manager (Bailey does concede this point). But God does not get caught out by the people of this age!
- Furthermore, there is no indication that this parable is principally about mercy (the terminology is absent), except in Bailey’s mind. He posits that the master was merciful right at the beginning, when he did not throw the manager into jail, which was ‘certainly’ (Bailey’s word) warranted, as if the manager had committed a definite criminal offence. But Jesus deliberately fails to tell us what the manager might have done wrong exactly. Actually, depending on the offence, the master’s dismissal of the manager might have been rather severe – but the precise nature of the offence was of no interest to Jesus in his telling of the parable, only the self-righteousness (but actual unrighteousness) and self-justification⁶ of the manager. The word for ‘wasted’ is in fact the same as the younger son’s ‘wasting’ of his inheritance in the prodigal son parable – but that wasn’t criminal, deserving of jail.
- In the parable, the master does not ‘justify’ the manager, he only ‘praises’ him for his undeniably unrighteous behaviour. Is this the response of God to our unrighteousness? Our God justifies the repentant, but he doesn’t praise our sin.
- Finally, Bailey sees the master in the parable as being parallel to the father of the prodigal son. But why cannot we allow the opposite possibility that the two are in deliberate contrast? Why cannot the unrighteous manager parable be a negative, not a positive, parable? This is my suggestion here, on which note I beg to find Bailey wanting, and return to the thesis of this study.

⁵ God’s aseity is the doctrine that his being is independent of all external influences on him that seek outside his will to affect or control him. God’s impassibility is not that he cannot suffer (he can and does, on his own volition), but rather is the doctrine that no external (and thus creaturely) entity can make him suffer, thus causing him pain, loss or diminution against his will.

⁶ The various words cognate with ‘righteousness’ and with ‘justification’, and also the word ‘dishonest’ (actually, ‘of unrighteousness’) in v.8, all have the same root (‘*dik*’) in NT Greek, and so are intricately related with one another. Uncontroversially, I trust, I take ‘righteousness’ to connote a right relationship with God in Christ, but with implications for godly conduct, or in the case of ‘self-righteousness’, the belief by the unhumble that they are good enough for God; and ‘justification’ to refer to a person being made right with God in Christ, or in the case of ‘self-justification’, the attempts by the unhumble to put themselves in the right.

Context – the all-important exegetical tool

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.

Back in 2008, I and one very good friend,⁷ both of us ordinary Bible-teacher/pastors, with no pretensions or agenda that we knew of, 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 many qualms. We came up with the thesis of this study. After many years of reflection, we remain convinced of our conclusions. Our key was, and is, the broad-sweep *context* of the surrounding material.

First, 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. Prominent in these chapters is the kingdom of God (the rule of God in the hearts and lives of saved sinners), as also the repentance, trust and obedience to the gospel required to enter it. The sinfulness of the current generation is clearly exposed, especially the pride, hypocrisy and self-justification of the religious establishment. But in contrast to the self-aggrandising self-righteousness of the religious top-brass, Luke's readers are shown the self-abasing humility required of a follower of Jesus Christ, and also the cost, responsibility and reward of discipleship. In passage after passage the crucial question in Luke's mind has been, '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 context'. A parable, supposedly teaching shrewdness, suddenly appears unexpectedly in a long section of Luke that has nothing else at all fitting into 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 shrewdness noted in v.8b, 9a is with regard to 'of this age' manipulation of people, not about using money. The interpretation seems so 'out of context'.

⁷ My long-standing friend Marcus Honeysett, director of *Living Leadership*. He was a major contributor to the early development of the thesis of this study.

A negative parable?

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 I can't find a counter-example elsewhere. Indeed, in the verses following our parable, love for worldly riches (*'mammon'*), 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 *'money/wealth'* references following the parable are not about the right handling of money, as such, but about its capacity to separate us from God.

The only person commending the dishonest manager in this parable is the *'rich man'*, the master, in v.1, but, given he has allowed himself to be manipulated, he must surely be considered as one of the *'sons of this world'* (v.8). And in v.10ff, dishonesty, apparently commended in v.8, is the opposite of faithfulness and trustworthiness. To say that it is shrewdness being commended here, and that the dishonesty is *'neither here nor there'*, when, immediately following, dishonesty is condemned so comprehensively, seems to me 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, beyond credibility. It can only mean the opposite given the pharisaical context; v.10–13 are saying, effectively, *'That was a story about ungodly behaviour. But you, don't be like that'*. And the suggestion that the manager, being *'more shrewd [by the standards of this age] ... than the sons of light'* (v.8), 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 suggest, therefore, that the key to understanding 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); but 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! The apparent works-righteousness of v.9, effectively declares, it might seem, *'be shrewd now and it will have rewards in eternity'*! Can we find a way out of our predicament? We shall suggest how in due course, but first a foray, but by no means a distraction, into the Old Testament, where in Psalm 49 we find remarkable correlations with our parable.

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; [*sophia* (σοφία), LXX; *ḥokmôt*, Hebrew (plural form of the more usual *ḥokmāh*)]
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; [*sophos* (σοφός), LXX; *ḥăkāmîm*, Hebrew (plural)]
the fool and the stupid alike must perish
and leave their wealth to others.*
- 11 *[LXX] Their graves are their homes [*oikíai*] forever, [‘unto the age’ – *aiōna* is 3rd declension, accusative singular]
[Hebrew, ESV footnote] *Their inward thought was that their homes were for ever, [*e’ôlām*]
[the above are alternative readings – see comment below]
their dwelling places [*skhēnōmata*] to all generations [‘unto generation and generation’],
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 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 [οἴκου] 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.*

The bulk of this psalm exposes the folly of trusting in worldly riches, with no thought of the ephemeral nature of what the wealth of this age offers. There are, indeed, ‘eternal dwellings’ (evoking Luke 16:9) for the godless rich (Psalm 49:11, 14, 19), but they are in Sheol. We note the fascinating coincidence of themes between this psalm and our parable.

- Justification – the futility of self-justification (Psalm 49:7b, 18a, 20a, 12a, ‘pomp’), the impossibility of being justified by another (v. 7a, 18b), but God alone justifies (v. 15, 8-9).
- 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 worldly, winning the praise of others (v. 18); the upright are vindicated (v. 14c, ‘*in the morning*’, cf. the ‘*sons of light*’ of Luke 16:8), over against the eternal darkness for the unrighteous (v. 19b, 14-15, ‘Sheol’).
- Futile trust in worldly riches – the rich and mighty have no eternal advantage over the poor and lowly (v. 2, 6, 10).
- 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 ‘mind-set’ of the world (v. 20, ‘*without understanding*’), over against a godly mind-set (v. 3).
- ‘*You cannot serve God and mammon*’ (Luke 16:13) – an apt summary of the psalm.

I 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, but, by way of comparison, we need no persuasion that our Lord on the cross was mindful of Psalm 22.

So in Luke 16 there is a fascinating echo of Psalm 49, especially v.11. *‘Their graves are their homes forever [‘unto the age’], their dwelling places to all generations [‘unto generation and generation’], though they called lands by their own names.’* The synonymous parallelism in v.11 in the LXX employs both the Greek ‘house/home’ word (Greek here: *oikia*) and the Greek dwelling/tabernacle word (Greek here: *skēnōmata*, with its background in the animal-skin tents of nomadic society) in its successive stanzas. The successive use of both these terms (houses, dwellings)⁸ in the same order in our parable (16:4,9), whether Jesus intended it at the time or not, makes for an intriguing connection between the parable and the psalm. The themes of self-righteousness and self-aggrandisement, common to both the psalm and the parable, make for an even stronger case.

There is a further intriguing connection between Psalm 49 and Luke 16. The final narrative of the latter is the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Does this not equally evoke the *‘low and high, rich and poor together’* of Psalm 49:2? The bulk of this parable, and of the psalm, is devoted to the tragic eternal fate of the godless rich man in each case, but the blessed destiny of Lazarus (16:23,25 *‘by [Abraham’s] side ... now he is comforted’*), and of the godly psalmist (49:15, *‘God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me’*) are briefly recorded too to highlight the contrast. In both cases, the rich man pursues his worldly lifestyle, imagining that his luxury will last forever. His endeavours most certainly have their eternal consequence, but not in eternal bliss. That Luke records this parable here, in this context, is significant, we suggest, in the divine providence.

Here in the psalm 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 – just like both the unrighteous manager and the rich man in torment in hell; ‘we’ll live for ever’, they think, and boast amongst themselves (v.13), fooling themselves into believing their self-made security here will last and last, without any thought for the eventual ravages of old-age and death and what lies beyond. Yes, indeed, the psalmist says, pricking the self-righteous bubble, it surely *will* last for ever, but not here – the only eternal home they will have is their grave in Sheol – and that will certainly last and last. If, then, Psalm 49 is read as a biblical ‘control’ upon the parable, and this is exegetically appropriate, then the conclusion is clear: Jesus is being intentionally ironic in Luke 16:9, perhaps even sarcastic, and intends to say, in effect, ‘There are only two places where the dwellings of the worldly-unrighteous are eternal, and those are first, their facile, pompous, self-promoting, self-justifying imaginations, whereby they fool themselves into denying it will end; and secondly, Sheol, the grave, and that is most certainly eternal’. And this fits brilliantly with our take upon the parable. It certainly reconciles the apparent discrepancy between the LXX rendering of 49:11 (their eternal home is their grave) and the Hebrew rendering (in their

⁸ The ‘house/home’ word in the Greek is *oikos* and *oikia* in Luke 16:4 and Psalm 49:11 respectively, and the ‘dwelling/tabernacle’ word is *skēnē* and *skēnōma* in Luke 16:9 and Psalm 49:11 respectively, with their background in the animal-skin tents of nomadic society.

imaginations their self-deceived earthly security and comforts will go on and on without fail) – the two amount to the same thing.

The ‘eternal dwellings’, v.9

One difficulty attendant to all interpretations of the parable is how we understand v.9 – this is enigmatic on any reading. On the conventional interpretation, on the basis of the translation ‘eternal dwellings’, it looks as though worldly-wise craftiness gets us 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 is a severe problem for the conventional stance on the parable, whereby it commends canny dealings with the world, or shrewdness more generally. 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. Several translations, notably the NIV, clearly seeking (unsuccessfully) to avoid the problem, for no good reason render the final clause in the passive voice (*‘you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings’*) – and even then the NIV unaccountably omits the definite article.

The adverb *phronimōs* (*φρονίμως*) in v.8, can indeed, generally speaking, mean ‘shrewdly’, as NIV and (equivalently) ESV render it here – ‘wisely’ or ‘sensibly’ are general alternative meanings. Other translations of v.8 have ‘astutely’, ‘prudently’, or ‘cleverly’, even ‘wisely’). This study suggests that, in context, something like ‘cannily’ or ‘craftily’ would be a more apposite sense of ‘shrewdly’ here – the manager has cannily (and cunningly) put his worldly mind to the task of bettering his position before men.

The Hebrew language of the OT allows the usual ‘wisdom’ word group to be rendered similarly. The noun ‘wisdom’ in biblical Hebrew, *hokmāh*, usually connotes the wisdom of God himself, consequently enjoined upon the Hebrew people, and it most often does. An example pertinent to this study is Psalm 49:3, where the intensive plural *hokmōt* certainly means godly wisdom. But not always – witness Jonadab, Amnon’s crafty and devious ‘fixer’. In 2 Samuel 13:3b, Jonadab is described as very *hākām* (the adjective from *hokmāh*) – ‘crafty’ (ESV), ‘shrewd’ (NIV), ‘subtle’ (ASV/KJV). I’ve also seen renderings ‘sly’, ‘clever’, ‘streetwise’, ‘devious’, ‘astute’, ‘prudent’, even ‘wise’. ‘Scheming’ would be another alternative, just like Joab in the next chapter, and his ‘wise’, *hākāmāh*, (nay, not ‘wise’ but scheming) henchwoman. But Jonadab is ‘Mr Fixit’, the epitome of godlessness, certainly not wise with the wisdom of God, arguably even more evil than Amnon, for whom he devised his ugly plan for Amnon’s infamous rape of his sister Tamar. Jonadab knows how to get what Amnon wants. This is the opposite of godly wisdom – shrewdness, perhaps, but without scruple; cleverness, but without integrity.⁹ The point I am making is that the Hebrew mindset is capable of using the same word used for the

⁹ John Calvin remarks in his *Sermons on 2 Samuel* that ‘if God has given us prudence, he would add also integrity and sincerity so that we would keep ourselves from craftiness’.

very wisdom of God himself to describe despicably crafty deviousness. Thus also the unrighteous manager. If Jonadab was worse than Amnon, so the unrighteous manager is worse than Jonadab – for he self-interestedly ‘fixed it’ for himself, not for another.

We must 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/crafty in their generation than the sons of light’*. The ‘they’ of v. 9 are the worldly friends, the ungodly of this age. In v. 4 the unrighteous manager does these friends a favour, trusting that they will reciprocate. In the parable, the only homes the manager’s friends have got to welcome him into are their own earthly dwellings. These are hardly going to be in heaven, and yet v. 9 seems to say they are – it doesn’t say that God will welcome us to heaven on account of our shrewdness, with worldly mammon or otherwise; rather, it says that worldly people will, if *‘eternal dwellings’* means heaven. Granted, there is a change from the house/home word in v. 4 to dwelling/tabernacle in v. 11, but we have argued that the significance of this is in that it reflects Psalm 49:11. Clearly, all the dwelling places of Psalm 49 and Luke 16 are of this worldly age.

Our resolution of the difficulty considers the word translated ‘eternal’ (Greek: *aiōnios*) in v. 9. Our key is a simple noun earlier in the text (v. 8) which means ‘an age’, but this is obscured in ESV and NIV, which translate it ‘world’. It’s the Greek word *aiōn (αἰών)*, which gives us the English word ‘eon’,¹⁰ usually meaning a long period of time, as in expressions like ‘down through ages past’, or ‘he’s a child of his age’, or even ‘it’s taken ages’. It occurs in v. 8 in the expression which we can accordingly render as ‘the sons [people] of this age’. Clearly this refers indeed to this current worldly age (as the ESV and NIV renderings show), and not to the age to come – not, that is, to eternity. 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, and *not* the age to come, 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. The root meaning of this Greek adjective, *aiōnios*, is something like ‘pertaining to the age’, or ‘in respect of the age’; or, perhaps, *aiōnios* could be rendered simply by the adjectival phrase ‘of the age’, where the age being referred to is the age in question *as per the context*. There isn’t such an equivalent adjective in the English language (actually there is – ‘aeonian’ – but it’s arcane). Very often in the biblical use of this word, the age being referred to in context is the eternal age, most frequently referring to heaven, in which case the word must mean just that – ‘eternal’. Indeed, we must note that in the majority of instances of the adjective ‘eternal’ it is in the expression ‘eternal life’ (more than 40 of the 70 occurrences). This is not surprising, given the intense interest in eternal life in Scripture. Because there are so many occasions where the Greek adjective clearly does mean eternal, including in the Septuagint (LXX) translation of the Old Testament, it seems that ‘eternal’ has

¹⁰ The Latin ‘*aeterna*’, yielding the English ‘eternal’, also means ‘age’.

become the default translation. And thus in our parable, the Greek adjective is the word translated as ‘eternal’ in v.9, in all the translations – ‘*the eternal dwellings*’, with the implication, as typically understood by commentators, that it refers to heaven.

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? In v.4, the manager hopes that by his unrighteous plan, people might ‘receive’ him ‘into their houses’. In v.9, the suggestion is made that if ‘you’ behave likewise, your friends ‘may receive you’ into their ‘dwellings’. The Greek word ‘receive’ is identical in the two verses, enhancing the symmetry, and thus supporting the notion that it is earthly houses in view in both instances. This, we suggest, makes much more sense.

By no means does the word ‘eternal’ in Scripture necessarily have to refer only to eternal life. Despite the preponderance of instances where *aiōnios* is, quite rightly, translated ‘eternal’, there are some instances where the word certainly refers to the present or previous ages of this world. Thus, *aiōnios* occurs in Romans 16:25, ‘*the mystery kept secret for long ages*’ (actually: ‘in *aiōnios* times’, and this cannot in context mean ‘in eternal, age-to-come times’); and in 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 1:2), ‘*before the ages began*’ (actually: ‘before *aiōnios* times’).

In fact, the first incidence of ‘eternal’ in the New Testament is in respect of eternal judgement, not eternal life (Matthew 18:8, ‘*eternal fire*’), and the very last reference to eternity in the Bible, where the eternal destiny of the ungodly is clear (Revelation 22:18-19 – albeit the ‘eternal’ word not used there). We read of *eternal fire* also in Jude 1:7 and Matthew 25:41, *eternal destruction* in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, *eternal judgment* in Hebrews 6:2, and *eternal sin* in Mark 3:29. We submit that Luke 16:9 is a further example. God’s final judgment on the ungodly, particularly as exemplified in Psalm 49, and their punishment, is decidedly eternal, no less than eternal life for the redeemed.

Ultimately it doesn’t matter whether the aeon-adjective in v.9 be interpreted as ‘of-the-current-age’; or it be interpreted as ‘eternal’, as long as in the latter case ‘eternal’ is taken to mean ‘eternal’ in the worldly, cloud-cuckoo-land imagination and/or in the grave of those who die in their worldliness. We remain convinced that the unrighteous, self-justifying, world-bound, pompous posturing of the ungodly, as exemplified by the dishonest manager, to be fled from by the righteous, is the one and only point of this parable. It is no surprise that the Pharisees saw the point immediately, and, refusing to humble themselves, ridiculed their Lord and Saviour.

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 (reflecting their use in Psalm 49:11), but both are clearly ‘this-age’ dwelling places. On this understanding, v.9, then, is a (not un-typical) ironic remark turning the screw on the Pharisees and any who are

mindful 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. Go on! Manipulate your way to worldly security. Crafty conniving is just how the world behaves. It may even work in this world! But *only* in this world – it will have no justifying effect for the next.’ – but (implied here, and clearly stated in the ensuing words to the disciples), ‘it shall not be so amongst you’.

If we are correct in seeing irony in v.9, then v.8b is ironic too. The point here is that the ‘sons of this [dark] age’, epitomised in the fictional unrighteous manager, can be far more assiduous in securing their earth-bound future, albeit unrighteously, than the ‘sons of light’ are typically diligent in caring about their heaven-bound future.

Self-righteousness in the other lost son

We return now to our examination of context. Of supreme importance is that we seek to set the parable within the wider context of its 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, in stark contrast to the younger son’s humble acceptance of underserved grace. The ‘also’ (Greek: *kai*) in 16:1, unaccountably missing in NIV, strongly connects the two parables; this is not surprising, given that, we aver, the self-righteousness of the elder son is reflected in the self-justification of the unrighteous manager.

The parable of the lost sons 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 and clear throughout. The ‘prodigal’ son, utterly undeserving, but confessing his waywardness and unworthiness, and humbly 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 the rejection of the father’s love by the elder son. The contrast is between the prodigal son who is utterly undeserving and is justified entirely by the father’s grace, and the other son who believes he has always been good enough for the father, scorns the father’s love to his brother, and refuses to accept it for himself. Ignoring 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 and the confession of the prodigal son, is the second point of the parable.

Intriguingly, there is more than just 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’ pointed concluding words here (some of which, *‘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 this (v.2), and are, also typically, muttering in the background (cf. 16:14; 19:7, and 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. 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, and the pride and hypocrisy, of the religious leaders. 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.’”*

The religious top-brass are listening

Our suggestion, then, is that although the first three parables do include 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. 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 16:1-8a, although Jesus is explicitly addressing 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 (v.14) – 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 (and Zacchaeus) were ‘lost’ and were ‘found’ (15:24,32). But in reality there are other, intractably lost people in these parables: these are the resentful, self-justifying elder son and the unrighteous, self-congratulatory manager (and his eventually sycophantic master) – as likewise the ninety-nine ‘righteous’ (actually self-righteous) persons who *‘need no repentance’* (or so they think). These lost-but-not-found, of their own volition, cannot be found. It’s our firm belief, therefore, that all four parables contain

the same theme of targeting the self-righteous, and we are perplexed as to how the ‘shrewdness is good’ theory retains its traction – this traditional interpretation sits devoid of needful contextualisation.

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 (nor the last) 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 true 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). Jesus’ response is the parable of the good Samaritan. 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, perhaps too full of herself, 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 supremely relevant parable of the Pharisee and Tax-collector (Luke 18), in contrast to the latter’s model of humility, we see the epitome of self-justification, and this 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’* (20:47), where Jesus rubs the point home by his contrast between ‘the rich’ and the ‘poor widow’ immediately afterwards (21:1-4, cf. Psalm 49). We could add other examples – the sin of 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 for the religious establishment to hear, 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 speaks of the ‘you scratch my back, 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 strike at the Pharisees (who are listening, and who love money, v.14) for the way they treat the things of God but seek to be justified by human activity. We grant that Luke does have a special interest in exposing the unrighteous lure of worldly wealth. Mammon is a dangerous trap, a root of many kinds of evil. Nonetheless, it is self-love and self-glory that is itself the root in people’s hearts of their love of money. The self-centredness of the human heart is more foundational, as Jesus declared in the parable of the rich fool, *‘who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God’* (12:21).

Pride and humility, trust and betrayal of trust

Although pride is not explicitly mentioned in this parable, the pride of the unrighteous manager is clearly implicit, especially if we recall Mary’s explicit mention of pride in her song in Luke 1:51, ‘[God] *scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts*’. Here the word ‘scattered’ is precisely the Greek verb for ‘wasted’ (or squandered) in Luke 16:1, where the word ‘wasting’ (*διασκοπίζω*) is also the same verb as is used for ‘squandered’ in Luke 15:13, in the parable of the prodigal (or squandering) son. Perhaps Jesus deliberately used this verb here in this story precisely because he had used it of the prodigal son, and he wishes the hearer/reader to see the contrast. Yes, both the younger son and the manager are in a crisis of their own making, through inappropriate life conduct, and both are planning for their future. But the parallel stops there – the distinct contrast between their two ways of dealing with the crisis is manifestly self-evident. The son throws himself on the mercy of his father, and the point of the parable is that in like manner we should throw ourselves on the mercy of God. But for the manager, mercy is not on his agenda – rather, he throws himself on his hoped-for success of his scheming ways, and the point of the parable is that we should do the opposite. The squandering son humbled himself before his father, but the manager’s pride is clear in his being ‘ashamed to beg’, and in his sense of exalted honour (see on v.3b); and although he says he is not strong enough to dig, he, given his life status, would consider it shameful and demeaning to do manual labour. The older brother of the prodigal son, spurning his father’s love, is also lost in his own pride at the end of Luke 15. It’s instructive that the manager doesn’t throw himself on his master’s mercy, either explicitly or implicitly. Clearly knowing himself to be guilty, he makes no defence or protestation of innocence. He is silent, it seems, before his master.

So his trust thereafter is solely in himself and his conniving ways. Trust is a stated theme of this parable and Jesus’ subsequent commentary (v. 11). The master has trusted his manager to fulfil his duty with care and honesty, but he has betrayed this trust. Trust and faith (and belief), as also the closely related concept of faithfulness, are exactly the same thing in the Hebrew mindset (and in the Hebrew and Greek languages). So the manager’s failure in trust is precisely his unfaithfulness to his master (v.10-12). There is no indication in this parable that he trusts in mercy from his master (otherwise he would surely have cried for mercy from his master at the outset). His subsequent actions cannot possibly improve his chances of mercy. A lesson on how to obtain mercy is not the point of this parable.

So the manager’s unfaithfulness (untrustworthiness) and his lack of humility (his pride) go hand in hand. They always do.

Conclusion

The unrighteous manager is not, positively and commendably, the model of shrewd, decisive action in crisis, but is, negatively and reprehensibly, the model of self-justifying contempt for mercy and grace. We strongly suggest that the commendation by the rich man of his manager

is not meant to show that the latter’s actions are commendable in God’s sight, nor even that they represent, parabolically, any kind of admirable shrewdness. Perhaps the master’s declared approval of his manager is intended to stave off public criticism of him in the face of his employee’s new popularity. The employer is one of his own – he is a child of his worldly age, of his *‘own generation’* (v.8), now trying to save face, having been made to look a fool. 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’* (15:1) 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 righteousness 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 (*‘I am a self-made man’* – like the rich man in 16:19ff) of the unrighteous hoarder of worldly riches; and yet there certainly are eternal dwellings for the unrighteous – in the grave, where they *‘will never again see light’* (Psalm 49:19).

‘By repentance and trust in Jesus, come to your eternal home, where by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone you will be accepted by the God who justifies you, and where he will *‘tabernacle’* with you’ – that essentially is our Lord’s message. We acknowledge that our treatment of v.9 is unusual, especially regarding the interpretation of *‘eternal’* – indeed, we’ve never seen it proposed anywhere else. Nor has anyone connected the parable with Psalm 49 before, so far as we know, although we find it hard to believe that someone, somewhere, hasn’t done this. We admit to never having heard any public exposition of this parable other than the *‘be shrewd’* one, although a suggestion here and there of irony as an explanation of the parable can be found in scholarly circles, but without the contextualisation we aver, and explanations sanitising the manager’s actions are known too, likewise. Preaching the parable on our understanding, using our suggested interpretation of v.9, 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. It has been done, though.¹¹ Nonetheless, we submit our considerations for the scrutiny of our peers.

¹¹ Appendix D.

Notes on the ESV, NIV and Greek text

v.1a This is Luke's commentary. Jesus' speech is from 1b-13. Luke doesn't resume his own narrative until v. 14. All in between is Jesus, telling the parable up to v.8, then teaching about unrighteous mammon.

v.1a The 'also' (unaccountably missing in NIV) connects the parable strongly to the previous material, the parable of the prodigal son and his older brother, especially as *καὶ* is present as *well as* the connecting particle *δέ*.

v.1c The word 'wasting' (*diaskorpizōn/διασκορπίζων*) here is the same verb as is used for 'squandered' in Luke 15:13, in the parable of the prodigal (= squandering) son. It's also the same verb as Mary used in her song in Luke 1:51, in declaring that God '*scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts*' – here 'scattered' = squandered, wasted, or discarded. Perhaps Jesus deliberately used this verb here in this story precisely because he had used it of the prodigal son, and he wishes the hearer/reader to see the connection.

v.3b There is a clear note of self-pity, self-aggrandising superiority, and pride in the manager's refusal to work menially or beg. That he is '*ashamed to beg*' is particularly significant. Shame and honour are opposites in his culture. His pride lies in his sense of self-exalted honour.

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 The master's commendation of his manager, as a man just as much 'of this age' as the manager, is not so extraordinary if we realise that the manager, by his actions, has made himself popular with certain tenants. It would be clearly counterproductive for the master, who arguably has been made to look a fool, to now impose sanctions – his own popularity would nosedive. The text doesn't make this point, so we must not rest upon it. But it is a sufficient explanation nonetheless.

v.8a We think there is no justification for allegorising 'master' as Jesus Christ or God, thereby positing that the master's leniency (as suggested by some, e.g. Bailey) represents God's mercy. True, the word 'master' here is the usual Greek word for 'lord', but this doesn't have to connote Christ in every NT occurrence (or God in every OT occurrence) – 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 worldly age by a son of this worldly age.

Accordingly, it would be wrong to allegorise this parable (or any parable without express warrant), making individual elements (people, things, actions) of this fictional narrative represent corresponding elements in the underlying spiritual metanarrative. Rather, the individual details of the narrative build up a picture, and from the whole story we derive the

meaning within the narrative's own context; then, and only then, do we derive the spiritual meaning of the parable.

v. 8a,b We should note that the narration of the parable, beginning at v. 1b, terminates after v. 8a, with v. 8b commencing Jesus' commentary on the parable. Nonetheless, v. 8 is one sentence in the various critical texts, running on from 8a to 8b via a Greek semi-colon (or, some texts, a comma), with v. 8b being a subordinate clause to the main clause of v. 8a.

v. 8-11 The word translated 'dishonest' in v. 8 and twice in v. 10 in both ESV and NIV is actually the word for 'unrighteous' (actually 'of unrighteousness' in v. 8, a Hebraism). But the same word is translated 'unrighteous' (ESV) in v. 9 and v. 11 (actually 'of unrighteousness' in v. 9), 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. 8a *'for his shrewdness'* (ESV) is actually *'because he acted shrewdly'* (*phronimōs/φρονίμως*), 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', 'cannily', 'craftily', all of which are within its semantic range; or, paraphrasing, 'in a street-wise manner' or 'as per the mind-set in question', namely a very worldly mind-set. Likewise, 'more shrewd' in next sentence, or perhaps 'more street-wise'. If we're right in seeing this as a negative parable, then we suggest 'craftily' is the most appropriate rendering of *φρονίμως* in context. See Appendix A for further comment. Likewise *'more shrewd'*, v. 8b, is the comparative of *φρόνιμος*, the adjective 'shrewd/crafty'.

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 study this lies behind our suggested re-rendering of the adjective in v. 9, so read 'of this age' instead of 'eternal'.

v. 8b NIV's 'people' (twice) is actually 'sons' (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 emphatic, employing both the strong conjunction (*καὶ*, not *δε*) and the personal pronoun (*καὶ ἐγώ*). The first word, *'and/kai'*, has the force here of *'indeed'*. 'wealth' is the word sometimes translated 'mammon' as also in v. 11, 13. This word (*mamonas/μαμωνᾶς*), of Hebrew/Aramaic origin, connoting that which one puts one's trust in, but received into Greek as is) is clearly used pejoratively in Luke 16 – it represents 'worldly riches'. Originally it was an Aramaic word.

v.9 The expression ‘*mammon of unrighteousness*’ (μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας), is a Hebraism, the same Hebraism as in v.8, identical in meaning to ‘unrighteous mammon’ (v.11). It is rendered ‘*unrighteous wealth*’ (ESV), ‘*worldly wealth*’ (NIV).

v.9b The word ‘dwellings’ (*skēnas, σκηνάς*, ‘tents’ – or tabernacles – with its background in the animal-skin tents of nomadic society) is different from the ‘houses’ word (*oikous, οἴκους*) in v.4. But we suggest that the use of the *oik...* word in v.4 and the *skēn...* word in v.9 reflects their respective use in Psalm 49:11.

v.9b A principal suggestion of this study is that the word translated ‘eternal’, from the same root as ‘age’ (v.8b), should perhaps be understood 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.9-15 v.9 continues Jesus’ commentary on the parable, and we consider this commentary runs at least to v.15. Attempts to split some or all of these verses off from the parable, making them an independent unit, falter, we aver, on account of the several clear connections. Unrighteousness (dishonesty), noted of the manager in the parable (v.8a), is recollected in v.9,10,11; ‘dwellings’ in v.9, albeit a different word, recalls the ‘houses’ of v.4; the manifest unfaithfulness of the manager in the parable is recollected in v.10-12, where in v.12 ‘*not been faithful in ... another’s*’ clearly recalls the manager’s conduct; ‘mammon’ connects v.9,11,13; the manager is a servant with a master, cf. v.13. Then again, we must keep v.14-15 connected with v.1-13, because the Pharisees had been listening, and they are lovers of money (albeit the ‘mammon’ word not used here); and because the reference to self-justification in v.15 clearly describes the manager.

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. We must remember that all the ‘righteous’ words and all the ‘justify’ words have the same underlying Greek *δικ* root. It is arguably a shame that the translations routinely obscure the presence of these *δικ* words (NIV has a single one only, ‘justify’ in v.15). 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 self-righteousness, 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. It’s about how *not* to behave, not about how one *should* behave. ‘Don’t be self-justifying like this man, or like the Pharisees’ is the essential 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'*. The noun *'riches'* seems to be implied. It is not surprising that Luke doesn't employ the term *'mammon'* (*μαμωνᾶς*) here, given that this word has pejorative overtones in Luke 16.

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 (*'mammon'* again), 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. 14 The self-righteous *'ridicule'* of the Pharisees in 16:14 evokes their self-righteous *'grumbling'* (*diegonguzon/διεγόγγυζον*) in 15:2 and 19:7, albeit the verb is different.

The term *'lovers of money'* is the single Greek word *'philarguroi'* (*φιλάργυροι*) – *'mammon'* isn't used here. The same word, *'philarguroi'*, is used in 2 Timothy 3:2-5, *'For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.'*

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. Thus *'justify'* is *'make righteous'*, although as inheritors of the Reformation, we should see this as *'imputed'* righteousness, rather than *'imparted'*. See on v. 10 above.

v. 15b The *'abomination'*, which evokes the idea of an idol, is principally, of course, self-righteousness, although mammon as a means to that end is in mind too.

Luke 16:1-15 – The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

ESV-UK – with a few significant **translation amendments**, as suggested in this study, and some original Greek words for reference

¹ He [Jesus] also *[καὶ]* said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager *[οἰκονόμον]*, 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 *[κύριός]* 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 *[οἴκους]*.’ 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 manager **of unrighteousness** *[ἀδικίας]* **because he acted cannily/craftily** *[φρονίμως]*. For the sons of this **age** *[αἰῶνος τουτου]* are more **canny/crafty** *[φρονιμώτεροι]*

in **[dealing with]** their own generation *[γενεάν]* than the sons of light. ⁹ And I *[καὶ ἐγὼ]* tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of the **mammon of unrighteousness** *[μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας]*, so that when it fails they may receive you into the **of-the-age** dwellings *[or (?) tabernacles]* *[τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς]*.

¹⁰ “One who is faithful *[πιστός]* in a very little is also faithful *[πιστός]* in much, and one who is **unrighteous** *[ἀδίκος]* in a very little is also **unrighteous** *[ἀδίκος]* in much. ¹¹ If then you have

not been faithful *[πιστοὶ]* in the unrighteous *[ἀδικῶ]* **mammon** *[μαμωνᾶ]*, who will entrust *[πιστεύσει]* to you the true **[riches]**? ¹² And if you have not been faithful *[πιστοὶ]* in that which

is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³ No servant *[οἰκέτης]* can serve *[δουλεύειν]* two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise *[καταφρονήσει]* the other. You cannot serve *[δουλεύειν]* God and mammon *[μαμωνᾶ]*.”

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

Luke 16:1-15 – The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

ESV-UK

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 for NIV variations, and see Appendix E for the Greek text.]

N.B. – ESV inserts a new section heading ‘The Law and the Kingdom of God’ before v. 14, but it seems out of place there – it surely belongs before v. 16. v. 14-15 belong surely with the parable.

Luke 16:1-15 – The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

NIV-UK

¹ Jesus told his disciples: 'There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So he called him in and asked him, "What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer."

³ 'The manager said to himself, "What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg – ⁴ I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses."

⁵ 'So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?"

⁶ "Three thousand litres of olive oil," he replied.

'The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifteen hundred."

⁷ 'Then he asked the second, "And how much do you owe?"

"Thirty tons of wheat," he replied.

'He told him, "Take your bill and make it twenty-four."

⁸ 'The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

¹⁰ 'Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³ 'No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.'

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵ He said to them, 'You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.'

N.B. – the various NIV versions differ only in the measurement units used in v. 6, 7.

Appendix A – Textual issues in v. 8,9

v. 9

The final word of v.9 in Greek is *skēnas* (σκηνάς), ‘tents’, plural of *skēnē* (σκηνή) – tent. This may possibly be significant, in that it’s the word used for the Hebrew tabernacle (its predominant use in the NT, especially in Hebrews, as well as in the OT). This is the temporary mobile dwelling place of God among his people during their wanderings in the wilderness, and housing the ark, where God sits enthroned upon the ‘mercy seat’ (or ‘atonement cover’). The word is likewise used of the tent David erected in Zion for the ark. The verb form is found in John 1:14, where we read that ‘*the Word* [the divine Son] ... *dwelt among us*’, or ‘*tabernacled among us*’. This latter usage is repeated in Revelation, to denote God ‘*dwelling*’ with his people in heaven, as well as for his people ‘*dwelling*’ there with him. The OT tabernacle is where God was met¹² and worshipped in his temporary home until the more permanent temple was eventually built by Solomon, which itself, destroyed on earth, is fulfilled in Christ, the living temple of God’s presence with his people. On earth now, God’s people worship and access God in Christ, not in a building. Christ in glory reigns in the eternal city, where again no tabernacle or temple is needed, for the whole of heaven is flooded with the immediate presence of God.¹³

Now, we have argued that v.9 cannot be taken to suggest that there is heavenly reward for the behaviour of the unrighteous manager; not, at least, without doing violence to sound exegetical principles, especially regarding context. This is disallowed by the context of consistent reference to the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, and the total absence of any context suggesting shrewdness is a godly virtue. In context, the god of this age in Luke 16 is mammon, epitomising the self-aggrandising, self-justifying tendencies of the Pharisees. Suppose, then, we read the end of v.9 as ‘... *they may receive you into the tabernacles of [the god of] this age*’. This makes sense. Whilst the righteous people of God enjoy their eternal rest in the eternal kingdom, tabernacling with him, the unrighteous, who worship the mammon of unrighteousness, have only the decidedly temporary of-this-age tabernacles where they worship their own god for this life only – their world-bound dwellings. Until, that is, their life here ends and they obtain their own eternal home, which is not, indeed is a far cry from, Christ’s eternal kingdom (as seen from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus very shortly after this one). Thus the term *aiōnious skēnas* (αιωνίου σκηνάς) at the end of v.9 can be taken to mean simply ‘of-this-age tabernacles’, where the unrighteous are world-bound in their worldly ‘religion’, tabernacling with their mates, without thought for their eternal destiny; or the term can be taken to extend its meaning to that destiny, which is, of course, the eternity

¹² ‘There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you’, Exodus 25:22.

¹³ ‘And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb’, Revelation 21:22.

of Sheol away from the living presence of God. So did Jesus, in using the word *skēnē*, intend the tabernacle association to be inferred? Likely perhaps, but we should not rest upon it.

Given that there are these two occurrences of the ‘aeon’ word in the Luke 16 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’ with the expectation that it refers to heaven. There’s another noun-adjective pair that operates in this passage very similarly: v.11 refers to the ‘*unrighteous mammon*’, and v.9 to the ‘*mammon of unrighteousness*’ (taking the Greek words as they are in the order they are). Surely these expressions are synonymous. In fact, ‘mammon of unrighteousness’ is a Hebraism – an idiomatic way of saying ‘unrighteous mammon’ in Hebrew (as ESV does render it in v.9). Intriguingly, though, in v.8 in ESV the master commended ‘*the manager of unrighteousness*’, which is an awkward expression (though reflecting the Greek words in order), failing there to note the Hebrew idiom, when they could have rendered it ‘*unrighteous manager*’ (far better). Thus we suggest that the ‘aeon’ noun in v.8, ‘*sons of this age*’, operates in exactly the same way as the ‘aeon’ adjective in v.9, ‘*of-the-age dwellings*’ (our preferred translation). The adjective means ‘of-the-age’ (‘age’ taking its precise meaning from the context). The more common translation of v.9, ‘*eternal dwellings*’, obscures this Hebraism.

Why, then, we ask, was ‘*aiōnios*’ ever translated ‘eternal’ in this parable? Well, we have demonstrated in the study 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, the conventional interpretation (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) denotes ‘heaven’ and not ‘Sheol’ nor simply ‘this age’. 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, because the conventional interpretation holds its devotees so tightly – the priority of the received paradigm (herd instinct). 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, in whose sight he is unrighteous, and is set to be so eternally. 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, with faith only in his own scheming ways.

v. 8

Another textual issue is the meaning of the Greek adverb *phronimōs* (*φρονίμως*), v.8a, 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. Generally speaking, the adverb can be rendered ‘wisely’, or ‘shrewdly’ in a good sense, in certain instances, if the context justifies it (see next paragraph below) – 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* (*φρόνημα*) essentially means (in the Hebrew thought-world of the NT writers) 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, as in ‘street-wise’. This, we consider to be the case here – hence the translations render it such as ‘shrewdly’ (in a worldly sense), or, better, we suggest, ‘cannily’, ‘craftily’, ‘deviously’ or ‘cunningly’; what is important is that a dishonest, worldly mind has devised a cunning scheme for manipulating others. The word *phronimōs* (*φρονίμως*) 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 mind-set. We must not read NT Greek as if it were written by Greeks. Luke certainly understands fully the Hebrew way of thinking.

Generally, *phronēma* (*φρόνημα*) may mean wise with the mind-set (wisdom) of God (e.g. Romans 8:5b, 6b), or it may be foolish with the mind-set (folly) of man (e.g. Romans 8:5a, 6a; cf. the apostle Paul’s play upon the words ‘wisdom’ and ‘folly’ in 1 Corinthians 1:17-30). 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 (but is used in Psalm 49:3). The adverb *phronimōs* (*φρονίμως*) in v. 8, must in context, then, mean something like ‘cannily’ or ‘craftily’ – he has deviously and cunningly put his self-centred worldly mind to the task of bettering his position before men.

Appendix B – 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 [Or: (marginal ESV translation) everyone is forcefully urged into it] [biazetai/βιάζεται]. **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 Saviour 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 both 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 ('preached', 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-centred in every other sense); 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, Galatians 3:24) 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.

Notes on the ESV, NIV and Greek text of v. 16-18

v.16a 'The Law and the Prophets' means the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the Christian OT. However, this is nuanced in this verse by the obvious conclusion that it has all come to fulfilment in Christ. John the Baptist, the final OT prophet, announces in his ministry the imminent coming of the messiah, who fully and finally fulfils the entire prophetic body of OT scripture.

v.16b See above for how we understand 'kingdom'.

v.16b 'preached' here is not the usual 'preach'/'proclaim' word, but, rather, it reads, word by word, *'the kingdom is being gosselled/evangelised (euangelizetai/εὐαγγελίζεται)'* – the verb is present passive. Principally, in context, the 'good news' (gospel) of the kingdom is proclaimed in the life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension to glory of Christ, but then, secondarily and subsequently, in the written NT and spoken preaching ministry of the apostles and of the consequent Christian church. Indeed, Jesus Christ is 'gosselling' the kingdom to disciple and Pharisee alike in Luke 16.

v.16c The words 'his way' (ESV) are not present in the text. Word by word it's simply *'everyone forces [biazetai] into it'* – if 'forces' is the correct rendering.

The exact interpretation of the word *biazetai* (βιάζεται) (v. 16) is debated. There are two issues. First, the verb can generally have connotations of ‘force’ and ‘violence’, and most translations of v. 16 defer to this strong meaning. But the sense of ‘urgent insistence’, the weaker meaning, is also possible, and profoundly to be preferred here, I suggest. Secondly, is the verb ‘passive’, or is it ‘middle’ – active but with intense personal interest? So, the word can mean *either*:

[everyone] forces [his way] into it (understanding the word as ‘middle voice’), thus NIV and ESV main text and most translations; only the strong ‘force’ meaning of *biazetai* works with the middle voice; *or*:

[everyone] is being forced into it (‘passive voice’, strong meaning of *biazetai*); *or*:

[everyone] is being strongly/compellingly urged into it (‘passive voice’, weaker meaning of *biazetai*).

My own conviction, against NIV and ESV main text, is that the latter option is compellingly to be preferred (even the ESV marginal rendering still has a note of force). Holman, NET and Message translations agree, but hardly any others. The verb is present tense, hence my addition of the word ‘being’ for avoidance of doubt. My reasoning is that the majority translation is simply not true, everyone is not ‘forcing their way into it’, and ‘being forced’ might tend to imply universalism; whereas the passive voice third rendering above fits the context exactly – the ‘good news’, when proclaimed, by its very nature does indeed strongly urge its hearers to heed it and thus enter the kingdom.

Further, it must be conceded that the verb ‘*biazetai*’ does conventionally carry a sense of striving, even if we reject the sense of brute force. After all, if the proclaimed gospel, and the proclaimer who is primarily Christ himself, compellingly, insistently and persistently urges the hearer to enter the kingdom – by repentance and faith – then we do not suppose this is an easy ride for the one entering, for repentance from sin never is, and the gospel of the cross is hard to accept. New kingdom members certainly have to strive at this – after all, they have been urgently ‘*compelled to come in*’ from ‘*the highways and hedges*’ (Luke 14:23 in the parable of the great banquet); cf. 2 Corinthians 5:11-15, where ‘*Christ’s love compels*’ the apostle to ‘*try to persuade others*’. The preacher strives as much as the one preached to. It’s thus not surprising that the verb ‘*biazetai*’ has been employed.

Additionally, in v. 16b the verb is present passive (‘*is being evangelised*’), so the verb in v. 16c being present passive too makes for a neater symmetry. The parallel verse in Matthew 11:12, where the word ‘*biazetai*’ is almost certainly passive, is also tricky, but can yield similar results with careful handling. One way or the other, we observe that the growth of the kingdom is far from insignificant – when God acts, he acts to fulfil his promises. Promise fulfilment is the key to understanding v. 17 as well.

v. 17 We take it as axiomatic, then, that the OT Law, the corpus of God’s Torah (instruction) of his people, or, to put it another way, God’s Word to his people, the children of Israel, was always intended to find its fulfilment in Christ. In God’s intention and purpose all of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (the entire OT) anticipate this. The OT prophets saw the truth

of it, but for them the fulfilment was ‘anticipated future’, yet with much uncertainty as to detail of when, and in precisely whom, the fulfilment would come. All they knew of ‘whom’ was that he would be the suffering servant, the promised messiah; ‘When’ was entirely unknown to them then (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-12).

Thus we infer that ‘the Law’ referred to by Christ in v. 17 is precisely the-Law-fulfilled-in-Christ, or ‘*the law of Christ*’ as Galatians 6:2 terms it, for there is no other valid law after the advent of Christ.¹⁴ Any attempt to deny the fulfilment of the Law in Christ denies the Law and denies Christ and denies the gospel.¹⁵ This is surely the force of v.17. Until Christ, the OT Law pertained exactly as given in all its intricate detail. But then John the Baptist proclaimed the messiah, and in doing so ushered in the age of Christ’s kingdom and the gospel. The law has now to be viewed through the filter of fulfilment.

Accordingly, every explicit detail of the OT law which has a specific and final fulfilment in Christ has to surrender its precise OT entailment to a NT one. In this category, of course, to name a few important examples, are the priest (now Christ, our great high priest), the temple (now Christ, in whom God makes himself accessible and fully known), the sacrificial system and particularly the day of atonement (now the cross of Christ, in which we find forgiveness and cleansing), the OT requirement for circumcision (now, in Christ, circumcision of the heart, i.e. repentance and faith).¹⁶

v.18 This verse too, 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. Perhaps, as an example of self-righteousness and unfaithfulness (‘I have the right to pick and choose whom I will be faithful to and whom I shall reject’), it was all the more pertinent in Jesus’ day, if easy divorce was commonplace then. After all, Christ only needed to cite one example of voiding the law to illustrate his point, and this one is entirely apposite.

¹⁴ This study acknowledges the vexed debate within Reformed Protestantism between ‘Covenant Theology’ and ‘New Covenant Theology’, but does not itself, here, take a position on the issue. Both sides should be content with the fulfilment motifs listed in these paragraphs, albeit respectively nuanced by the various stances within the dispute.

¹⁵ The word ‘fulfilment’ should not necessarily connote abrogation of what went before. The debate referred to is particularly troubled in this respect. At least we should see ‘fulfilment’ as ‘consummation’ – a bringing to its glorious goal of all the OT looks forward to, as in Romans 10:4.

¹⁶ Some, but not all, would add Christian baptism as a NT fulfilment, and thus entailment, of OT circumcision. Sabbath rest is a contested issue within this debate. In one sense there is certainly a final fulfilment in Christ with implications in eternity – now in the NT era we have rest in Christ (Matthew 11:28) and an eternal sabbath for the people of God, prepared for us in heaven (Hebrews 4:9). This is surely beyond dispute. However, the OT also obligates the sabbath as a creation ordinance, and the extent to which this pertains still (and in how strict a sabbatarian sense) is still debated robustly. Every other aspect of Torah that is a clear creation ordinance (e.g. marriage, gender identity, family, fruitful labour), and/or reflects the very character of God himself (e.g. grace, mercy, the fruit of the Spirit), remains an obligation still.

Appendix C – Our responses to some actual peer critique received

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. 10b ff (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, perhaps to save his own face). 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 compared unfavourably 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) Certainly, 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 (yet undeterred)! 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/χρόνος*’ present in the examples we give, but *aiōnios/αἰώνιος* is an adjective and will always qualify 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/καιρός*’ (‘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

A Sermon Preached in Croydon Hills, Melbourne, Australia

19 September 2021

Luke 16:1-15 – The Parable of the Unrighteous Manager

Long ago, in early 14th century France, there was a king (Philip IV) whom history records as being proud, arrogant, conceited and self-serving, but ineffectual as a leader. A clerk in his court¹⁷ wrote a famous satirical poem, a satirical parody on the behaviour of both royalty generally and also the established Church of Rome.

This poem was called *The Tale of Fauvel*; Fauvel¹⁸ is the name of the central character, who is actually a pompous, proud horse that is a caricature of the king. Fauvel the horse demands larger and more luxurious accommodation, more obliging servants, better and choicer food, all to the point of ridiculousness.

Chiefly, he needs to be groomed constantly, rubbed down and stroked, and his mane interwoven to vain glory. Now, the French word meaning to groom a horse is *corroyer*, so to groom or stroke, or pander to Fauvel the fictional, vain horse is *corroyer Fauvel*, and do you know, from that is actually derived the English expression to *curry*¹⁹ favour.

Why am I saying all this? Well, in our parable today, we meet someone who is trying to curry favour with others.

We can summarise the story like this:

Master and unrighteous manager	v. 1
Problem – what are you doing?	v. 2
Problem – what shall I do?	v. 3
Plan – I know what I'll do!	v. 4
Problem solved – (debtor 1)	v. 5, 6
Problem solved – (debtor 2)	v. 7
Master and unrighteous manager.	v. 8

Walking through the parable verse by verse, first we start with the master and his unrighteous manager in verse 1 – 'Jesus also said to the disciples' [the *also* is very important, though

¹⁷ Attributed to Gervais du Bus, 1310-14.

¹⁸ *Roman de Fauvel* in French. 'Fauvel', or 'fauve' refers in French to the chestnut brown colour of certain horses (held to be a symbol of dishonesty in medieval times); the English near equivalent is the word 'fallow'. It has been noted that Fau-vel can be punned, appropriately, as 'false veil' or 'veiled lie'. Alternatively, as a near acronym for six sins, namely flatterie, avarice, vilenie (depravity), variété (fickleness or inconstancy), envie.

¹⁹ This English verb, derived from French *corroyer*, and meaning 'to groom a horse', is still used in horse riding circles, e.g. in the grooming tool, the currycomb.

missing from the NIV, and it links this passage to the previous chapter – remember, no chapter or verse divisions when Luke wrote this – so it follows straight on from, and is linked to, the end of the parable of the lost sons and their loving father] – ‘[Jesus] also said’ ... ‘a certain rich man’ [probably a wealthy landowner] ‘had a manager’, of his estate. The manager was being accused of wasting the master’s possessions. The word *wasting* there is identical to the word used of the prodigal son *squandering* his inheritance; ‘prodigal’ means exactly that – squandering or wasting.

Moving on to verse 2, notice I have indented the lines to indicate heightening tension in the story; The master called him and said, What’s this I’m hearing about you, what have you been up to, what are you doing? Turn in the account of your management, you may no longer manage my estate. So the master has a problem – with his manager, and with his wealth!

Verse 3 – I’m indenting more in my suggested structure – notice the suspense is building! The manager now has a problem – he’s been sacked – ‘What shall I do?’ Luke writes; the manager *said within himself*; talking to himself; What shall I do?! My master is taking away the management from me. To dig I’m not able, to beg I’m ashamed. Notice there the pride and self-pity of this man who has been caught out.

Verse 4. We’re in the middle now – notice the tension has built up to a climax. Let’s think of ourselves as in the crowd when Jesus is telling this story. We, today, know the outcome now because we just read it, but listening then in the crowd, at that moment, we are waiting with suspense – what’s he going to do? – is he going to repent and fall on the master’s grace and mercy, or shall he contrive some other way to wriggle out of his predicament? He has made his decision – ‘I know what I’ll do!’ so that when I’m sacked *they* might receive me into their homes. But who are *they*? Remember, he has been thinking himself, debating in his mind – ‘I know what I’ll do!’ And we find out in the next verse – the tension is easing now.

Verses 5 & 6. He calls in debtors, probably tenant farmers who have agreed to pay rent in arrears in the form of a fixed amount of the produce of their land. So he says to one, ‘what do you owe my master?’ A hundred baths of oil.

‘Come on – quick – here’s the bill in the account book – go on – change the hundred to fifty’ [and, by the way, scholars of the Aramaic language which Jesus would have been speaking in, say that the Aramaic character for 100 can be changed to the character for 50 with just a stroke of the pen, likewise 100 to 80. Very easy to cook the books]!

Then, verse 7, another debtor, 100 kors of wheat, same solution.

We come to the end in verse 8. ‘And the master praised the *manager of unrighteousness* because he acted *craftily*.’ We would say, of course, the *unrighteous manager*, but I love that turn of phrase, the *manager of unrighteousness*, used in the original text. Notice how we have arrived exactly where we started, with the master and his unrighteous manager, even more unrighteous now, because he is cooking the books in coercing the tenants to fraudulently reduce their debts to win friendship and hospitality in this world.

Now, the parable ends right there, halfway through verse 8. This parable is described by just about every commentator as somewhat perplexing (in one case as ‘impossible to interpret’),

because the problems seem insoluble, mainly because Jesus' comments that immediately follow the parable, v. 8b, '... for *the sons of this world are more shrewd in their own generation than the sons of light*', and v. 9, '... use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that, when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings'; these two comments by Jesus on his own parable seem to praise unscrupulous behaviour, and indicate that such worldly, *unrighteous* behaviour gets you into the kingdom. In order to explain these sayings, there has been a tendency to speculate on what is actually going on, many extra details inserted into the story that were not there in the first place.

But we know, don't we?, that the details of a parable don't usually have any spiritual meaning themselves; rather they help to build up a picture, and from the whole story we derive the meaning. Let's stick with just the text in front of us, let's examine the words carefully, and it'll all fall into place. So, a dishonest manager, caught squandering his master's wealth, and concerned for his future (having been dismissed), fraudulently reduces the tenants' debts, thereby currying favour with them – hoping they will repay him with friendship and hospitality in this world. He is to hand over the account books which would include the bills of debt after they had been altered.

His real motive? – he's currying favour with the debtors (remember Fauvel!), ingratiating himself with them in a 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' kind of behaviour. The lord or master, who is also a man of the world, praises the manager for his cunning scheme. Perhaps it's his kind of game, and they are as bad as each other. Perhaps the master is 'saving face' – not wanting to appear publicly as the 'bad boy' over against the now popular manager.

When I once attended a course on leading Bible-study groups, there was a session devoted to difficult or controversial Bible verses or passages. A good question to ask sometimes, it was explained, is not, '*what does this mean?*', but rather, '*what can't this mean, what can it not possibly mean?*' Here, the manager is patently dishonest (we're told so explicitly), so this parable *cannot* be commending dishonesty. So, when Jesus refers to shrewd behaviour, what does he mean? *Shrewd* cannot here mean *wise* in the sense of sagacious, like an owl, with good judgement. Otherwise, Luke could have used the more common word for *wise* in his language, the one that gives us the girl's name *Sophie* and philosophy (love of wisdom). But he uses a different word, better translated worldly-wise, or streetwise perhaps.

Shrewd is not a positive quality anyway. It's derived from *shrew*, not just a small insectivorous mammal with a pointy nose, but also a cunning, vixenish person, manipulative, canny, clever, cunning and crafty like a sly fox. Shakespeare immortalised this idea with his play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, whose principal character was exactly like this. Is that not the picture of our manager in his scheme to curry favour with the debtors? Given that Jesus uses the term '*people of this world (or of this age)*' and that they are dealing with '*their own generation*' craftily, in contrast to *children of the light* who surely are the truly wise ones, the parable is therefore a negative parable – it's telling us how *not* to conduct ourselves, not how we *should* conduct ourselves.

And the reference to eternal dwellings cannot possibly be pointing to the eternal home in God's kingdom; there is, after all, an alternative eternal destination. The word *eternal* in the

Bible does not always refer to eternal life. When *eternal* is positive it always qualifies a positive quality such as *life* (by far the commonest), but also eternal *redemption, comfort, glory, dominion, gospel, inheritance, kingdom*, and (relevant to our parable today) from St Paul, 2 Corinthians 5:1, ‘... For we know that if the dwelling that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens’. And he continues, ‘we groan in our earthly dwelling, and long for the heavenly dwelling.’

But eternal can also be negative: so we read of *eternal fire* (the first use of *eternal* in the NT, in Matthew 18:8, also in Jude 1:7), *eternal judgment* (Hebrews 6:2), and *eternal sin* (Mark 3:29). God’s final judgment on the ungodly, and their punishment, is decidedly eternal, no less than eternal life for the redeemed. Verse 9 therefore (‘... make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings’) is a deeply ironic, even sarcastic comment by Jesus, made as a warning to his listeners – ingratiate yourselves with others in a worldly way, and they’ll invite you into their homes of *this world*. It won’t get you into that *house not made with hands, the heavenly kingdom*. Worldly wealth there is actually *wealth of unrighteousness*, wealth being the Aramaic word *mammon* which found its way into Greek and into English. This word meant originally, *that in which we put our trust*. It means worldly wealth or riches of any kind rather than just money.

But who are the listeners to our parable? Remember the manager’s pride here and his self-pity. We might think back here to the end of the previous chapter where the older brother of the prodigal son is lost in his own pride. Unlike his brother he does not repent of his pride. The story is left in high tension, unfinished (deliberately, of course) – we want to know, does the older brother repent and join the merry-making, or does he stay outside lost in his pride and privilege? The word *pride* describes him perfectly, and likewise the manager in today’s parable, like the fictional horse, Fauvel. The words *proud* or *pride* occur a couple of dozen times in the New Testament, mostly in Paul. James and Peter both quote a proverb from Proverbs 3:34, ‘*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*’. Pride, therefore, is incompatible with godly life.

Mary said, after she had been chosen to bear God’s Son Jesus, in her poem beginning ‘*My soul praises the Lord ...*’, and a verse or two later, ‘*[the Lord] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts*.’ *Scattered* there interestingly, is exactly the same word as squandered or wasted, which we had earlier: thrown away, discarded. The destiny of the proud. Notice also, scattered ... *in the thoughts of their hearts* – remember the manager thinking within himself what he was going to do. And the unrighteous judge in Luke 18 (v.1-8). The destiny of the proud, dishonest manager is certainly not the destiny of the sons of light – the manager may have curried himself some favour in this life from his worldly friends, but not for the life beyond.

So who were Jesus’ listeners? We know that this parable was spoken to the disciples, but remember, we are told, back at the beginning of chapter 15, where we had the parables of the two lost sons and their loving father, and of the lost coin and of the lost sheep, Jesus is talking to Pharisees in the presence of the sinners who were drawing near to Jesus (and didn’t they grumble at that, ‘*This man receives sinners*’ [15:1]!). And our chapter 16 follows on directly from that, and in v.14, the Pharisees ‘*heard all these things and sneered at Jesus*.’ The

Pharisees should have found themselves identifying with the older son in chapter 15, the son who was proud and privileged and self-righteous. Luke has had a consistent interest in this middle part of his gospel [end of chapter 9 to end of chapter 19] in the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were exactly that, self-righteous.

They're lovers of money; the principles of pride, arrogance, conceit, self-love and the appearance of godliness, all summarised with the word self-righteous, describing the Pharisees so well. And because they are lovers of money, they are not lovers of God, despite their toffee-nosed religiosity – Jesus has declared, 'You cannot serve God and mammon' [v.13d].

Jesus was constantly confronting the Pharisees, whom he once called a brood of vipers. Remember the lawyer who provoked the Good Samaritan parable; he was *desiring to justify himself* [10:25-37]? Jesus says to the Pharisees in 16:15, '*You are those who justify yourselves before people, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among people is an abomination in the sight of God.*' Abomination means idolatry (it always does in the Bible), so self-justifying behaviour, identical in meaning to self-righteousness, simply means to declare oneself in the right, instead of aligning oneself with God's right ways – worshiping self rather than God, the saviour.

But there is a warning for ourselves here, because, whatever our own position before God, we are at risk of Pharisaism, of allowing pride and love of worldly things to intrude into our lives, and to be devoted to outward forms of worship, rather than to God himself. I'm from England, and I was a member of quite a few Anglican churches as I moved around in the early course of my medical career. I have seen battles between different flower arrangers ('my flowers are better than theirs'), battles between church choirs and congregations, battles between organists and vicars, battles within church councils or leadership teams occasioned by stubborn unwillingness to compromise on personal preferences when there are no gospel issues at stake ('my preference trumps yours'). How careful we have to be not to be sucked down into self-important, self-justifying pharisaical behaviour. We must be on our guard. These parables are for us in our age as well as for Jesus' age.

Now, we can't possibly leave our parable without visiting Psalm 49. We might wonder if Jesus had this in mind when he told this story. Turn to it if you can.

1 *Hear this, all peoples!*

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?*

11 *Their graves are their homes for ever, their dwelling places to all generations*

12 *People in their pomp will not remain*

14 *... .. death shall be their shepherd ...*

Remember, Jesus said not to worry about wealth, or even everyday things; *'Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness ...'*. *My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride*, from that old hymn, is a line we should certainly sing.

Permit me to finish by returning to the opening tale of Fauvel the vain horse. His name is a combination of two French words, meaning a *false veil*. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were hiding behind such a false veil. Appearing to be super-religious and valuing the outward form of religion more than the required relationship with God, and loving worldly wealth, their lives were a sham. Let us pray for protection from constructing such a false veil for ourselves, separating us from God, even though we pretend to know him. Furthermore, our parable tells us that we cannot contrive our way into God's Kingdom; we cannot manipulate ourselves in by self-righteous, cunning craftiness. We cannot buy ourselves in by self-righteousness, or by our wealth. We can only enter God's kingdom by falling at the foot of the cross in repentance of our own pride and self-centredness and our rebellion against God's right ways. Look to the cross because our sins are nailed there at Calvary.

BW

Appendix E – Luke 16:1-18 – Greek text

1 Ἐλεγεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητάς· Ἄνθρωπός τις ἦν πλούσιος ὃς εἶχεν οἰκονόμον, καὶ οὗτος διεβλήθη αὐτῷ ὡς διασκορπίζων τὰ ὑπάρχοντα 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 ἑαυτῷ ὁ οἰκονόμος· Τί ποιήσω ὅτι ὁ κύριός μου ἀφαιρεῖται τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀπ' ἐμοῦ; σκάπτειν οὐκ ἰσχύω, ἐπαιτεῖν αἰσχύνομαι. **4** ἔγνω τί ποιήσω, ἵνα ὅταν μετασταθῶ ἐκ τῆς οἰκονομίας δέξωνταί με εἰς τοὺς οἴκους ἑαυτῶν. **5** καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος ἓνα ἕκαστον τῶν χρεοφειλετῶν τοῦ κυρίου ἑαυτοῦ ἔλεγεν τῷ πρώτῳ· Πόσον ὀφείλεις τῷ κυρίῳ μου; **6** ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· Ἐκατὸν βάτους ἐλαίου· ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ καθίσας ταχέως γράψον πενήκοντα. **7** ἔπειτα ἐτέρῳ εἶπεν· Σὺ δὲ πόσον ὀφείλεις; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· Ἐκατὸν κόρους σίτου· λέγει αὐτῷ· Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ γράψον ὀγδοήκοντα. **8** καὶ ἐπήνεσεν ὁ κύριος τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας ὅτι φρονίμως ἐποίησεν· ὅτι οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου φρονιμώτεροι ὑπὲρ τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτός εἰς τὴν γενεὰν τὴν ἑαυτῶν εἰσιν. **9** καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω, ἑαυτοῖς ποιήσατε φίλους ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας, ἵνα ὅταν ἐκλίπη δέξωνται ὑμᾶς εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς.

10 Ὁ πιστὸς ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ καὶ ἐν πολλῷ πιστὸς ἐστίν, καὶ ὁ ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ ἄδικος καὶ ἐν πολλῷ ἄδικός ἐστιν. **11** εἰ οὖν ἐν τῷ ἀδίκῳ μαμωνᾶ πιστοὶ οὐκ ἐγένεσθε, τὸ ἀληθινὸν τίς ὑμῖν πιστεύσει; **12** καὶ εἰ ἐν τῷ ἀλλοτρίῳ πιστοὶ οὐκ ἐγένεσθε, τὸ ὑμέτερον τίς δώσει ὑμῖν; **13** οὐδεὶς οἰκέτης δύναται δυοῖς κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾶ.

14 Ἦκουον δὲ ταῦτα πάντα οἱ Φαρισαῖοι φιλάργυροι ὑπάρχοντες, καὶ ἐξεμυκτήριζον αὐτόν. **15** καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· Ὑμεῖς ἐστε οἱ δικαιοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὁ δὲ θεὸς γινώσκει τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν· ὅτι τὸ ἐν ἀνθρώποις ὑψηλὸν βδέλυγμα ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ.

16 Ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφῆται μέχρι Ἰωάννου· ἀπὸ τότε ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ εὐαγγελίζεται καὶ πᾶς εἰς αὐτὴν βιάζεται. **17** Εὐκοπώτερον δὲ ἐστὶν τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν παρελθεῖν ἢ τοῦ νόμου μίαν κεραίαν πεσεῖν.

18 Πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμῶν ἑτέραν μοιχεύει, καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς γαμῶν μοιχεύει.

Luke 16:1-15 – Interlinear:

¹ Ἐλεγεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητάς· Ἄνθρωπός τις ἦν πλούσιος ὃς εἶχεν
 He was saying – <also to the disciples A man <certain was rich who had
 οἰκονόμον, καὶ οὗτος διεβλήθη αὐτῷ ὡς διασκορπίζων τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐτοῦ.
 a manager, and this man was accused to him as wasting ('prodigal') his possessions.

² καὶ φωνήσας αὐτὸν εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Τί τοῦτο ἀκούω περὶ σοῦ;
 And having called him he said to him, What [is] this I hear concerning you?
 ἀπόδος τὸν λόγον τῆς οἰκονομίας σου, οὐ γὰρ δύνῃ ἔτι οἰκονομεῖν.
 Give the account of your stewardship, not> for you are able any longer to manage.

³ εἶπεν δὲ ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὁ οἰκονόμος· Τί ποιήσω ὅτι ὁ κύριός μου
 said – within himself<<The manager, What shall I do, because my master
 ἀφαιρεῖται τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀπ' ἐμοῦ; σκάπτειν οὐκ ἰσχύω, ἐπατεῖν αἰσχύνομαι·
 is taking away the management from me? to dig not>I am able, to beg I am ashamed.

⁴ ἔγνων τί ποιήσω, ἵνα ὅταν μετασταθῶ ἐκ τῆς οἰκονομίας
 I know what I shall do, so that when I shall have been removed from the management
 δέξωνταί με εἰς τοὺς οἴκους ἑαυτῶν. ⁵ καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος ἕνα ἕκαστον
 they might receive me into the homes of them. And having called to [him] one<each
 τῶν χρεοφειλετῶν τοῦ κυρίου ἑαυτοῦ ἔλεγεν τῷ πρώτῳ· Πόσον ὀφείλεις
 of the debtors of his master (lord) he was saying to the first, How much owe you

τῷ κυρίῳ μου; ⁶ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· Ἑκατὸν βάτους ἐλαίου· ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ·
 to my master? He – [he] said, A hundred baths of oil. He – [he] said to him,
 Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ καθίσας ταχέως γράψον πενήκοντα.
 Take your bill and having sat down quickly write fifty.

⁷ ἔπειτα ἐτέρῳ εἶπεν· Σὺ δὲ πόσον ὀφείλεις; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν·
 Then to another he said, You – how much owe [you]? He – [he] said,
 Ἑκατὸν κόρους σίτου· λέγει αὐτῷ· Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ γράψον
 A hundred cors of wheat. He said to him, Take your bill and write
 ὀγδοήκοντα. ⁸ καὶ ἐπήνεσεν ὁ κύριος τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας
 eighty. And praised> the master the manager of [the] unrighteousness

ὅτι φρονίμως ἐποίησεν· ὅτι οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου
 because craftily> he acted, because the sons of [the] age [of]<this [are]

φρονιμώτεροι ὑπὲρ τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτός εἰς τὴν γενεάν τὴν ἑαυτῶν εἰσιν.
 more crafty than the sons of [the] light in the generation of them <<<are.

⁹ καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω, ἑαυτοῖς ποιήσατε φίλους ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ
 And I to you> [I] say, for [your]selves> make friends out of the wealth (mammon)

τῆς ἀδικίας, ἵνα ὅταν ἐκλίπη δέξωνται ὑμᾶς εἰς
 of [the] unrighteousness, so that when it fails they might receive you into

τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς. ¹⁰ Ὁ πιστός ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ καὶ ἐν πολλῷ πιστός ἐστίν,
 the of-the-age dwellings. The [one] faithful in very little also in much <faithful<<is,

καὶ ὁ ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ ἄδικος καὶ ἐν πολλῷ ἄδικός ἐστίν.
 and the one in very little <<unrighteous also in much unrighteous> is.

¹¹ εἰ οὖν ἐν τῷ ἀδίκῳ μαμωνᾶ πιστοὶ οὐκ ἐγένεσθε,
 If therefore in the unrighteous wealth (mammon) faithful not> you have been,

τὸ ἀληθινὸν τίς ὑμῖν πιστεύσει; ¹² καὶ εἰ ἐν τῷ ἀλλοτρίῳ
 the true [wealth]>>who to you> will entrust? And if in another's [wealth]

πιστοὶ οὐκ ἐγένεσθε, τὸ ὑμέτερον τίς δώσει ὑμῖν;
 faithful not> you have been, [the] yours> who will give to you?

¹³ οὐδεὶς οἰκέτης δύναται δυοὶ κυριοῖς δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει
 No servant is able two masters> to serve; either <for the one he will hate,

καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου
 and the other he will love, or one>> he will be devoted to and the other

καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾶ.
 he will despise. not> You are able God> to serve and wealth (mammon).

¹⁴ Ἦκουον δὲ ταῦτα πάντα οἱ Φαρισαῖοι φιλάργυροι ὑπάρχοντες,
 [they] were hearing – these things <all <<<The Pharisees lovers of money<being,

καὶ ἐξεμυκτήριζον αὐτόν. ¹⁵ καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· Ὑμεῖς ἐστε
 and they were ridiculing him. And he said to them, you [you] are

οἱ δικαιοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὁ δὲ θεὸς γινώσκει
 the [ones] justifying [your]selves before [the] men, [the] – God knows

τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν· ὅτι τὸ ἐν ἀνθρώποις ὑψηλὸν
 your hearts; for that-which-is among men <<exalted

βδέλυγμα ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ.
 [is] an abomination before [the] God.

Appendix F – Righteousness and Justice through Luke 9-19

As we survey these chapters of Luke's gospel, we note several passages where self-righteousness, self-justification and self-importance are all decried, either explicitly or by clear implication.

Examples in the earlier chapters 9-16 are:

- The disciples, clearly full of themselves, squabbling about who 'was the greatest' in Luke 9; followed by their false and inappropriate bravado in the next two stories, and the false protestations of devotion to Christ at the end of that chapter;
- The parable of the good Samaritan, and its introduction, in Luke 10, where the lawyer desires 'to justify himself'; followed by Martha's 'look at my selfless service' *faux pas*, trying too hard in her home;
- The woes Jesus declares to the Pharisees in Luke 11;
- Jesus' negative comments about the Pharisees at the beginning of Luke 12; then the parable of the self-aggrandising rich fool in that chapter; the type of servant described in Luke 12, who, defying his master's need of a 'faithful and wise manager', serves self instead; and the hypocrites at the end of Luke 12 who were so convinced of the rightness of their cause that they couldn't see that the judgement might be against them;
- The indignant, merciless synagogue ruler in Luke 13;
- The parable of the self-exalting guests at the wedding feast in Luke 14; and the excuse-making guests at the ensuing banquet;
- The parable of the lost sons in Luke 15, one humble and forgiven, the other tragically self-obsessed; and the introduction to all the 'lost' parables at the beginning of that chapter;
- The parable of the unrighteous manager in Luke 16; followed closely by the self-justifying, money-loving Pharisees; then the wealth-serving rich man at the end of the chapter, thinking only of himself until it was too late;

The common factor in all these myriad stories and parables is the tragedy of self-exalting, self-glorifying tendencies in people, where the promoting of self works to deny their Lord and God, and to do ill to others. The result is avarice (particularly love of money), pride, hypocrisy and injustice. The Pharisees are especially marked out for criticism in all these regards, and we must remember that the Pharisees were listening in to the parable of the dishonest manager.

The opposite of each and all of those self-aggrandising tendencies is, of course, humility – humility before God and before people. And along with humility is trust – a trust whose object is outside of self, particularly trust in God.

Because of the preponderance of these narratives decrying self-righteousness, and because the unrighteous manager is clearly self-justifying, it is the view of this study that it is impossible to see this parable as in any way commending the manager's actions. It *must* be a negative parable, declaring how Christ's disciples must *not* behave.

Examples in the later chapters 17-19 are;

Luke 17:7-10 – unworthy servants

Although not explicitly stated, the inappropriateness of self-aggrandising by servants is crystal clear. That which is the master's prerogative cannot be assumed by the servant. All the more so when the servant owes everything to the master. Humility before the master is due. Before God our maker and redeemer, self-importance and self-justification are all the more inappropriate.

Luke 17:11-19 – the ten lepers

Cleansed, but nine ungrateful.

Luke 18:1-8 – the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge

This parable, according to Luke's narrative, is about persistence in prayer, and accordingly we note that prayer is essentially a manifestation of trust. The question 'Who is justified?' is resolved by the question, 'Where is one's trust?'. The unjust judge trusts only in himself, and so by implication is self-justifying. He has no humility before God or people. The widow, by contrast, powerless to help herself, humbles herself before a higher authority, and places her trust there. God is declared to justify ('speedily') those who pray (who 'cry to [God] day and night'). The theme of justice/righteousness is clear throughout, and the *δικ* (*dik*) root occurs in six of its words; four times in the word for 'give justice' (v.3,5,7,8; 'avenge' in some versions), once to denote the judge as 'unrighteous'/'unjust' (translations differ), and once in the word 'adversary' (i.e., the one against justice for the widow).

Luke 18:9-14 – the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector

This parable is manifestly about how a person is considered 'justified'/'righteous'. Again, the connection between trust/humility and justification is explicit (v.9,14). Exactly like the unjust judge, the Pharisee trusts only himself (v.11-12), and is self-righteous (v.9, explicitly stated), and humbles himself neither before God nor before people (v.11). The tax-collector, by contrast, humbles himself before God (v.13,14b), and places his trust in him. He is the very opposite of self-righteous, and goes home justified by God.

These two parables, therefore, are clearly parallel.

Luke 18:15-17 – the little children

This short narrative complements the previous two parables. It is not disconnected. Children do not posture themselves before others, just like the widow and the tax-collector. They don't exhibit the proud attitude of 'Look at me; look what I have to give'. Instead, they are humble receivers. It is this aspect of childhood that Jesus highlights. The tax-collector cried to God

(remember v.7) for mercy; unlike the Pharisee, he didn't cry to God to recognise his worth. Humility and trust pervade the childlike response, just as for the tax-collector. But the disciples are too full of themselves to 'receive'.

Luke 18:18-30 – the rich ruler

The narrative of the rich ruler falls into exactly the same mould. He desires to inherit eternal life, a concept he can surely have heard only from the lips of Jesus himself – no doubt he had already heard some of the teaching of Jesus, capturing his interest, intriguing him, perhaps. But is he a receiver, like the little child; or is he full of himself, and of what he is and what he has. Is his approach to God like the Pharisee ('Look at me and what I am and what I have, God'), or is it like the tax-collector, crying out for, and receiving, mercy? We read of the ruler's sadness, as he found himself counting the cost of following Jesus; we don't know the final outcome – does he, doesn't he? We're left with the tension, as we, the readers, contemplate the same for ourselves, an impressive Lucan device.

Luke 18:35-43 – the blind beggar

The blind beggar lacks just about everything the world offers. He has nothing to be proud about, no human boasting. Recognising in Jesus the new Davidic Saviour King (a rare appellation for the Lord), he offers nothing of himself save for his need of mercy, and crying out (we've met that before – remember v.6?), he begs for what only the saviour can give; and a man of faith, i.e. trust, in Jesus, he receives not only his sight, but becomes a follower of Jesus (v.43a), and by implication receives the kingdom just like the child.

Luke 19:1-10 – Zacchaeus

The grumbling onlookers are contrasted with the repentant Zacchaeus. It hardly needs pointing out that here, in this familiar and touching narrative, we have humility before God trumping the lure of what the world offers. A worldly rich man becomes poor as he returns his ill-gotten gains to their rightful owners, and in turn this spiritually poor man becomes spiritually rich. Like the child, he receives what Christ offers, with shared hospitality at his earthly home representing an earnest of his now eternal home. The repentant sinner Zacchaeus, now a man of faith (he is a son of Abraham, the archetypal believer, justified by faith – again, this is trust), and a saved man, humbles himself before his Lord, whilst the onlookers, full of themselves, reject their saviour.

Just as we have noted a clear connection between humility before God (and before people), and trust in God, leading to being justified by God, and receiving mercy, the kingdom and eternal life; so, equally, we see an inevitable connection between human boasting, trust in riches and self-righteousness in this life, leading to spiritual bankruptcy and ultimate loss.]

Luke 19:11 – The Parable of the Ten Minas

The wicked, wasteful servant is judged and Jesus' 'enemies', who will have no-one, not even their saviour, 'reign over them'.