THE RIDDLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD: IS IRONY THE KEY?

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OF THE recorded parables of Jesus, none has proved to be such a *crux interpretationis*[1] as the parable of the Unjust Steward, Luke 16 1–13. Hunter observes that, "Every parable of Jesus was meant to evoke a response and to strike for a verdict."[2] What was the verdict he was striking for here? Exegetes have not been able to agree, nor, as it seems, to feel quite comfortable and secure in their conclusions.

I

Regarding the story itself, I have found no one who challenges its integrity. It has a highly authentic air, "as bold and challenging a story as Jesus ever told."[3] Superbly compact, it yet includes such realistic details — the debating of the steward with himself when turned out of his job; his triumphant ἔγνων, "I have it!", as he hits on a stratagem; his hurried but grandly expansive gestures toward his master's debtors — that some interpreters have been led to suggest a real life happening as underlying the parable.[4] The disciples have been imagined as recounting to Jesus with indignation some incident of a steward's crafty dealing, only to have him draw out of it a parable for all his listeners. The tale is realistic; and as for whether it comes from Jesus himself or not, it hardly seems plausible that an apocryphal parable involving such obvious difficulties of interpretation should have been incorporated by the early Christian community into its traditions of the parables of Jesus.

Critical questions focus rather on the application, or applications, found in vss. 8–13. Oesterley claims to trace a simple theme — consistency — running through these verses, developed in Semitic parallelism and culminating in the dictum, "You cannot serve God and mammon";[5] but most recent scholars feel there is evidence here of editing. It is suggested that the original meaning of the parable, whatever it may have

[1] Raymond Stoll, "The Unjust Steward — a Problem in Interpretation," *Ecclesiastical Review*, 105 (July 1941), p. 17.

[2] A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, p. 12.

[3] George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 117.

[4] The name of Chuza, steward of Herod Antipas, has been (quite improbably) put forward. See Guy Kendall, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward and its Bearing on the Problems of the Early Church," *Modern Churchman*, 39 (June 1949), p. 133.

[5] W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of their Jewish Background*, p. 196.

been, was lost rather early; so that by the time it reached the evangelist there were several variant interpretations which had become attached to it,[6] or which the evangelist himself may have had a share in supplying.[7] The verses which express and apply the significance of the story must be scrutinized line by line.

> "The master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence; for the sons of this world [Greek *age*] are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light. 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 habitations" (Luke 16 8, 9, RSV).

Scrutiny begins with vs. 8a: "The master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence." Unavoidably the translator takes sides in interpretation as he uses upper or lower case in his rendering of ὁ κύριος. If lower, then the clause reads as a part, the concluding part, of the parable. It is the master or lord of the parable who commends his steward. If upper case, it is the Lord who comments on the story he has just been telling. Admittedly, as the material is found in Luke's gospel it would be awkward to read it with the κύριος of vs. 8a referring to Jesus himself, because of the way Jesus speaks in the first person in vs. 9. It seems clear, as Manson has pointed out,[8] that Luke himself meant ὁ κύριος to refer to the steward's master; in fact, it may already have been cast that way as Luke found the parable compiled, and so it is rendered in all translations which I have seen. True, this introduces the first in the parable's series of difficulties of interpretation. Is it plausible that the master should commend for further crookedness the steward whom he has summarily dismissed? "Nonsensical," says Jeremias; "how could the lord of the parable have praised his deceitful steward?"[9] Other interpreters, taking the statement at face value, find in it an interesting psychological twist. The master, himself perhaps not unacquainted with sharp dealing, is broadminded enough to admire the adroitness of his steward even though the fellow practices it at his expense. "He knew deftness, quick thinking, unflustered action when he saw them."[10]

Recent scholarship tends to agree with Jeremias, however, that vs. 8a preserves a clue, and perhaps the only clue, to the original application which Jesus may have given to this puzzling parable. Thus as the parable was first retold, it was remembered that the Lord had commended the unjust steward. Bruce takes it so, in his later work, and so do Dodd

[6] Charles W. F. Smith, *The Jesus of the Parables*, p. 209.

[7] Thus C. H. Dodd uses it to illustrate the occurrence of different applications supplied to a parable even by the same evangelist, remarking, "We can almost see here notes for three separate sermons on the parable as text" (*The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 17).

[8] T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, p. 292.

[9] Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*[3], p. 33.

[10] Buttrick, *op. cit.*, p. 120: see also A. B. Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*, pp. 366 f.

and Hunter.[11] The argument of Jeremias, however, seems curiously illogical here. He adduces as evidence for reading ὁ κύριος as "the Lord" the fact that "the absolute use of ὁ κύριος in Luke's gospel in some instances refers to God, in all others (18 times) it refers to Jesus."[12] Luke 18 6, in particular, offers an analogy, where plainly it is Jesus who steps in to comment on the parable of the Unjust Judge: "And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says.' " This means that we argue, on the basis of Luke's narrative style, that he meant the κύριος of vs. 8a to refer to Jesus. But then what do we do with vs. 9, where Jesus himself comes in in the first person? Jeremias asserts positively that the beginning of vs. 9 is "a Lucan composition,"[13] which would seem to leave Luke at variance with himself. In a word, the conclusion suggested, whatever may be the means of arriving at it, is that as the parable was first retold perhaps all that was remembered was that Jesus had somehow commended the action of the dishonest steward. According to such a view, vss. 9–13, and perhaps 8b as well, represent later efforts of those through whose hands the story passed to provide it with some satisfactory application, associating with it what were perhaps *logia* attributed to Jesus, but originally having no connection with the parable.

What is significant to ask, then, as a point of departure is whether we believe that the story was first told by Jesus as an example to be emulated. If vs. 8a provides a clue to its original application, then the answer is yes. Jesus means to commend to his listeners, in some way, the action of the steward in his story. Vs. 8b, whether attributable to Jesus or the gloss of a subsequent reteller of the story, would seem to bear out such a reading of 8a. A comparison is drawn between the "sons of this world" (οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) and the "sons of light" (οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ φωτός).[14] The former show themselves, in the context of their own generation, to be "wiser" (φρονιμώτεροι) than the latter. Presumably, then, the "sons of light" have something significant to learn. The steward of the story has been commended (whether it is by his master or by Jesus himself does not seem to matter too much) for acting φρονίμως, thus showing that his kind are φρονιμώτεροι ὑπὲρ τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτός.

The key word is φρονίμως . . . φρονιμώτεροι. In normal usage it would be expected to be commendatory. In Matt 10 16 Jesus instructs his disciples to be "wise (φρόνιμοι) as serpents"; particularly regarding the Parousia they are to be like the "faithful and wise (φρόνιμος)

[11] A. B. Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll, I, pp. 585 f.; Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 17; Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 67. See also A. T. Cadoux, *The Parables of Jesus, Their Art and Use*, p. 133.

[12] Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[13] This on the basis that ὑμῖν λέγω, with ὑμῖν preceding, is a characteristic of Luke's style; see Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[14] This Semitism is not found elsewhere in the Synoptics, but is used by Paul (I Thess 5 5; cf. τέκνα φωτός, Eph 5 8) and in John (12 36).

servant" (Matt 24 45; Luke 12 42) or like the five "wise" (*φρόνιμοι*) maidens (Matt 25 2 ff.). Jeremias concludes that *φρόνιμος* carries the sense, in such contexts as the above, of "he who has grasped the eschatological situation."[15] The word is variously rendered by modern translators. Barclay gives us "shrewdly . . . shrewder";[16] Moffatt, "looking ahead . . . look further ahead";[17] J. B. Phillips, "careful for his own future . . . more shrewd";[18] the New English Bible, "astutely . . . more astute."

An interesting doubt remains. Surely the steward of the parable is not a man who has grasped the eschatological situation of the kingdom of God; his own "eschatological situation" is simply that he is losing the livelihood he has been enjoying, and presumably enjoying intemperately at his master's expense.[19] Confronted by such a crisis, he acts to salvage what he can against the coming time of hardship. Does he act crookedly? A few interpreters maintain that he does not, as will be discussed below. The fact remains that in vs. 8a he is referred to as "the dishonest steward" (*τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας*). In what sense, then, is this rather vivid but disreputable character held up for emulation?

The conventional view stresses his "wisdom" or "prudence." He is at least realistic and resourceful in the face of imminent personal disaster. This, we are told, is the quality to be emulated, and it really has nothing to do with the honesty or dishonesty of the particular stratagem devised by the steward. Manson comments, "It is the astuteness of the plan that is praised: and there is all the difference in the world between 'I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly' and 'I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly.' "[20] In the same vein, Hunter speaks of "practical prudence, shrewdness, 'savvy' — all, in short, that we mean by that wonderful word 'gumption,' " as being a quality demanded of the Christian disciple.[21] He also quotes Luther's comment that the point to fasten on, with reference to the parable, is "the cleverness of the steward who saw his own advantage and so well and wisely achieved it";[22] and how Calvin said of the story, "How stupid it is to want to interpret it in every detail! Christ simply meant that the children of this world are more diligent in their concern for their own fleeting interests than the sons of light for their eternal well-being."[23]

[15] *Op. cit.*, p. 34, n. [16] William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 215.

[17] See William Manson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Moffatt), p. 182.

[18] J. B. Phillips, *The Gospels translated into Modern English.*

[19] In vs. 1 the steward is accused of "squandering" (*διασκορπίζων*) his master's goods — an interesting link with Luke's foregoing parable of the Prodigal Son, in which (15 13) the son "squandered" (*διεσκόρπισεν*) his father's property.

[20] T. W. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 292. [21] *Op. cit.*, pp. 66–67.

[22] E. Mülhaupt (ed.), Luther's *Evangelien-Auslegung*, II, p. 677, quoted by Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[23] *Harmony on Matthew, Mark and Luke*, II, p. 177, quoted by Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

The rediscovery in modern criticism, or re-emphasis at least, of the eschatological dimension of Jesus' teaching sharpens up our parable. It is treated as a parable of crisis. Jesus sees the end as imminent; the kingdom of God is at hand. This vivid, earthy story reinforces the message: prepare; the time is short; he who is heedless now will be destitute tomorrow! Such a radical sounding of the warning is particularly prominent in Luke's gospel. The present parable is compared to Luke's use of the parable on agreement with one's accuser, which he treats as an eschatological warning (12 57–59), while Matt (5 25, 26) makes of it an exhortation to be reconciled with one's brother.[24] For such an interpreter as Jeremias this is the original thrust of the parable; it is the early church which has turned the parable's eschatological edge by adding to it a series of hortatory applications.[25]

V. 9 is the real *crux interpretationis* of the parable. No one can question that, as the text stands, this saying is represented as being a direct (and emphatic, καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω) commentary by Jesus on the parable. Is it, in all probability, authentic? The saying is so difficult that there seems to be no disposition on the part of interpreters to question its authenticity; presumably nothing so obscure would have been introduced into the tradition and erroneously attributed to Jesus. It must have been spoken by the Master himself.

On whether it originally belonged in this connection, however, there is considerable difference. Creed sides with Jülicher and J. Weiss in regarding the verse as "a later pendant,"[26] while Hunter goes so far as to say that "according to most modern scholars" it had no original connection with the parable at all.[27] Jeremias suggests that the saying "must have been originally addressed to tax-farmers or others classed as dishonest persons,"[28] an ingenious way of palliating, at least, the difficulty of its interpretation.

There are, however, certain features of vs. 9 which should be noted, and this before an interpretation is attempted. (a) The saying as it stands is closely adjusted to the parable. In the story the steward attempts to secure friends who may help him in his coming want, and he buys their friendship at a price in material goods. The saying enjoins the making of friends by such means, by "unrighteous mammon." In

[24] Thus A. B. Bruce wrote, "That provision has to be made against that day — the day of DISMISSAL — we are taught by the vivid picture of the steward realizing the fact" (*The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*, p. 362). C. H. Dodd expresses the idea more fully (*op. cit.*, p. 17) and Jeremias sees the parable as originally addressed not to the disciples but to "the 'unconverted,' the hesitant, the waverers, the crowd" (*op. cit.*, p. 35).

[25] *Op. cit.*, pp. 35–36.

[26] John M. Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, p. 202.

[27] *Op. cit.*, p. 105; cf. S. MacLean Gilmour, *Interpreter's Bible*, 8, p. 283, and T. W. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

[28] *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

the parable the steward faces a swiftly approaching time when he will no longer have any goods at his disposal; in vs. 9 there is such a reference, ". . . so that when it fails."[29] In the parable the steward's hope is that the "friends" he has bought over will receive him into their homes when he is destitute; in vs. 9 the friends made by means of mammon are to receive one into the "eternal tents."

(b) The saying is terse and enigmatic, unelaborated in itself (though vss. 10–13 may be a sort of elaboration), as many of the sayings of Jesus appear to have been. As we catch the accent of his teaching in the Synoptics, he seems often to have been content to jab a sharp enigma into the minds of his hearers with a single thrust. It was up to them, if they had "ears to hear," to turn the enigma over and over until its inner meaning became evident and it grew into a part of their understanding. "Many that are first will be last, and the last first";[30] or the saying about taking up one's cross, preserved in various forms:[31] these are of such a type, as vs. 9 here also appears to be.

(c) If vs. 9 is to be separated from the parable as an originally independent *logion*, one must find in it an independent meaning, which is difficult. In fact it is the attempt to find such a meaning, as I believe, which has betrayed interpreters into some very implausible exegesis. The saying is not self-contained; it leans on the parable. Thus the close adjustment of vs. 9, as it stands, to the foregoing parable, its enigmatic character, and the unlikelihood of its being preserved in early tradition as an isolated *logion*, all argue not only that it represents an authentic word of Jesus, but also that it has been associated from the beginning with the Unjust Steward.[32] The interpretation of the saying is vital for the interpretation of the parable, and *vice versa*.

> "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? 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 mammon" (Luke 16 10–13).

Regarding vss. 10–13, it is easy to suppose that these are *logia* of Jesus which were added on here, whether by Luke himself or by some earlier compiler of parables, perhaps to guard against misunderstanding. Without them it might have been thought that Jesus had actually commended

[29] Or, "when you fail"; see exegesis below.

[30] Mark 10 31; Matt 19 30; 20 16; Luke 13 30.

[31] Mark 8 34; Matt 16 24; Luke 9 23; also Matt 10 38 and Luke 14 27.

[32] See Laurence E. Browne, *The Parables of the Gospels in the Light of Modern Criticism*, p. 86.

the example of the rascally steward.[33] Some interpreters find them quite unrelated to the original intention and meaning of the parable.[34]

It has been suggested that vs. 10, in particular, may have been a current proverb or maxim,[35] or an isolated *logion* attributed to Jesus.[36] For the moment, however, it is enough to note that the close association of the saying with the parable of the Unjust Steward — whether that association is traceable to Luke, or to Luke's source, or actually to Jesus himself — means that the parable was read in the early Christian community by the time of Luke's gospel, at the latest, as not suggesting at all an example to be emulated. What is insisted on is faithfulness, integrity, such as the steward did not display.[37]

Vss. 11 and 12 develop in a particular direction the thought of vs. 10. The idea of integrity is reinforced, quite specifically with regard to money and material goods. Also a contrast is drawn between these present goods which, to the disciple of Jesus, are an alien currency, and the "true riches" which are to be his own.[38] Again, it is not implausible that these verses represent an independent *logion* of Jesus; what we notice is that, as they stand here, they are admirably adjusted to the context. The steward of the parable has, precisely, shown himself unfaithful in the "unrighteous mammon" and in "that which is another's."

In the case of vs. 13 the evidence is rather clear for its having been known and quoted independently as a saying of Jesus. Verbatim correspondence of the verse with Matt 6 24 would suggest that both evangelists found the *logion* in Q.[39] For Luke's purpose, it came in admirably to wrap up the teaching begun with the parable. This is a technique Luke uses elsewhere, as in 14 25–33, for example, where a passage on the cost of discipleship, including the short parables of a man building a tower and a king going to war, is concluded with the summary statement, "So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

II

We have now been over the parable and its appended sayings, taking note of some ideas regarding the origin and relationships of these.

[33] Thus Bruce, *Exp. Gr. Test.*, p. 586; Creed, *op. cit.*, p. 202; Gilmour, *op. cit.*, 8, p. 284.

[34] Cf. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 35. Hunter lists this as one of ten examples of "generalizing conclusions" which were later, and often erroneously, appended to parables in the gospel tradition, *op. cit.*, pp. 119–20.

[35] Gilmour, *op. cit.*, p. 284. [36] T. W. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

[37] It is interesting that Cadoux, who regards vss. 8 and 9 as additions not reflecting the original intent of the parable, finds vs. 10 much closer to its spirit; so much so that he feels it has "some claim on this ground to original assocation with the parable" (*op. cit.*, p. 134).

[38] Cf. T. W. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 294. Gilmour remarks "Money is a foreign currency to those whose citizenship is in heaven" (*op. cit.*, p. 285).

[39] Cf. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 35; Creed, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

It is time to go back and to probe for meaning — first, in the story itself.

From early exegesis onward it has been customary to interpret the stratagem of the steward, so concisely described, as being at once clever and dishonest. The steward acts astutely (*φρονίμως*), if not honestly; it is his astuteness which has been commended. A minority voice in interpretation has tried to salvage honor for the steward as well as adroitness. The fullest case for this position is made by Paul Gächter, although he picks up a much earlier thread.[40] Gächter argues for making an Oriental approach to an Oriental parable. According to the immemorial customs of the East the steward, whose master would not have been willing to be troubled by such things, would have extorted from his master's tenants whatever he thought they could be made to pay. Of this, a fixed amount was what the master expected to receive; the rest was the steward's legitimate "squeeze," his livelihood. Hence, it is reasoned, Jesus' listeners, who were familiar with such a pattern, would have recognized without explanation that the stratagem of the steward did not involve defrauding the master; it simply meant that he was easing the burden on the master's tenants by voluntarily foregoing most or all of his own commission. This action placed the tenants in his debt, and also earned for him the commendation of his master (vs. 8a).

Weatherhead and Hunter follow this same line of interpretation.[41] It appears plausible, especially as taking into full account the Oriental background of the parable; and it notably eases the difficulty of Jesus' appearing to commend as an example a dishonest action. It still leaves three difficulties, however: (1) the presumably magnanimous steward is referred to in vs. 8a as *τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας*; (2) vs. 9 must be read "straight," as an injunction to imitate the wisdom of the steward, although in such a way as to assure for oneself a reception to the "eternal tents" (of which more below); and (3) vss. 10–13 do not, then, adjust to the parable and must be regarded as a mistaken application added by some later compiler.

In a vein similar to the above, that is, of redeeming the steward's reputation, is the somewhat sentimental suggestion that by his stratagem he was really showing kindness to the oppressed debtors of his master. Bruce and others have suggested this idea,[42] and recently it has been

[40] Gächter, "The Parable of the Dishonest Steward after Oriental Conceptions," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 12 (April, 1950), pp. 121–31. Gächter refers to articles which had appeared in *ExpT* by Margaret D. Gibson, 14 (1902–3), p. 334; W. D. Miller, 15 (1903–4), pp. 332–34; and E. Hampden-Cook, 16 (1904–5), p. 44.

[41] Leslie D. Weatherhead, *In Quest of a Kingdom*, p. 227; Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

[42] Bruce, *Parab. Teaching of Christ*, p. 363; cf. C. Leslie Mitton, "The Unjust Steward," *ExpT*, 64, 10, (July, 1953), pp. 307 f.

given compelling expression in a sermon by Helmut Thielicke.[43] We are left feeling, however, that Thielicke's interpretation represents better homiletics than exegesis. The very quantities of the debts, as mentioned in the parable, while they may reflect the Oriental storyteller's love of large numbers, certainly would not convey a picture of poor share-croppers; nor would one suppose that the elegant steward, who shrinks from digging and from begging, would make it his hope to be received into the huts of peons.

In a word, as Jeremias puts it, "The various attempts to whitewash the Unjust Steward have all been unsuccessful."[44] They may ease the interpretation of vs. 8a, whether one reads the *κύριος* there as the master of the parable or as Jesus who commends the steward; but the real difficulty in vss. 8b and 9 remains. This is what we now need to probe.

Notice has been taken already of the key rôle evidently assigned, in vs. 8, to the paired words *φρονίμως . . . φρονιμώτεροι*. The consistent practice has been to read these words as commendatory, explaining in various ways, therefore, why and how Jesus might have held up the story of the steward, even such as he was, as an example to be emulated. In particular some recent interpreters have stressed the eschatological element. The time is short; the parable is a part of Jesus' urgent message that now is the hour for men to act wisely (*φρονίμως*), that they may be ready for the end. "For you, too, the challenge of the hour demands prudence, everything is at stake!"[45]

Such urgency of demand is certainly characteristic of the message of Jesus and of the *kerygma* of the early church, but I believe it is expressed through this parable in a different way. Is it reasonable to catch in the use of the key word *φρονίμως . . . φρονιμώτεροι* a lightly scornful or derogatory overtone? In English the idea of "shrewdness" or "cleverness" may carry such an overtone; it is a short step from "clever" to "crafty." Significantly, modern translators and interpreters of the Greek here tend to use such words as "shrewd" or "astute." Twice, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul calls these Christians *φρόνιμοι* with heavy irony, referring to their vaunted wisdom;[46] and in the Roman letter he uses the adjective in combination with *ἐν ἑαυτοῖς* and *παρ' ἑαυτοῖς* ("wise in your own conceits," "conceited") in a derogatory sense.[47]

Φρόνιμος as here used seems quite reasonably, then, to convey the

[43] Thielicke, *The Waiting Father*, Sermons on the Parables of Jesus (tr. John W. Doberstein, 1959), p. 101.

[44] *Op. cit.*, p. 127, n.

[45] Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 128. Charles W. F. Smith (*The Jesus of the Parables*, p. 211) finds such interpretations "strained and therefore doubtful," while admitting they may be the best we can do. Cadoux (*op. cit.*, pp. 133, 134) goes further; he fails to see how "the steward's knavery" showed any particular astuteness, and as for decisiveness of action, his was "the decisiveness of desperation."

[46] I Cor 4 10; II Cor 11 19. [47] Rom 11 25; 12 16.

idea of *savoir faire*, that worldly wisdom[48] in which those who set their sights on material prosperity and enjoyment consistently excel the "sons of light." Are the "sons of light" then to imitate these? I think not. It is a general tenor of Jesus' words about the kingdom of God to demand a radical distinction. In the kingdom most of the conventional standards and values of man's society are upended. So generally is this true that Jesus, in his categorical way, can speak of the last as being first and the first last, the greatest becoming as the youngest and the leader as the slave to all,[49] and of the one who would be his disciple as being expected to renounce every other good.[50]

How well does vs. 9 fit into this sort of pattern? We have concluded above that the saying, which fits the parable very closely, was probably connected with it from the beginning. How is it to be understood? Conventionally vs. 9 is read "straight"; that is, its meaning is sought according to the face value of the words used. Jesus tells his hearers (the disciples, according to vs. 1), "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations (tents)." This is taken to mean, although it may seem strange, that Jesus is counseling his followers so to make use of material wealth, to which he refers by the derogatory epithet, ὁ μαμωνᾶς τῆς ἀδικίας, that they may secure for themselves friends who afterward will somehow receive, or help to receive, them into the eternal dwellings.

There are a couple of minor points which may be argued over. For ἐκλίπῃ ("it fails") some witnesses have ἐκλίπητε ("you fail"); the meaning is much the same: material goods must fail, particularly in the dismissal which is death, when you yourselves will also fail.[51] As for the subject of the final verb, δέξωνται ("they may receive"), does this refer to the "friends" (as would naturally be supposed), or may it be a devout periphrasis to refer to God?[52] Or is it just the indefinite third person plural, meaning "you may be received?"[53] This also does not really matter much for the central problem of the verse, which is: Does Jesus actually mean to counsel one to use money to make friends in order in some way to assure one's admission to a heavenly dwelling?

Most interpreters, from the early fathers onward, have answered that this is the case. They have not always seemed comfortable with the answer.[54] Generally it has been assumed (on what exegetical ground?)

[48] Cf. T. W. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 292; Oesterley (*op. cit.*, p. 197, n.) mentions a similar use of φρονίμως in papyri.

[49] Mark 10 43 f.; Matt 20 26 f.; Luke 22 26; also Mark 9 35.

[50] Luke 14 26 ff.; cf. Matt 10 37 f.

[51] Cf. Gilmour, *op. cit.*, pp. 283 f.

[52] Cf. Gilmour, *ibid.*, p. 284; T. W. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 293; Wm. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

[53] Cf. Oesterley, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

[54] Bruce (*Parab. Teaching*, p. 359) lamely suggests (with what warrant?) that "this will not perplex anyone who remembers that the parabolic form of instruction does not

that the "making friends" refers to acts of charity.[55] Thus a parallel is pointed out to certain rabbinical sayings to the effect that the rich help the poor in this life, but the poor help the rich in the life to come.[56] Charity will prove to be the best investment possible, an investment paying everlasting dividends.[57]

Perhaps there were such aphorisms by some rabbis in first-century Palestine; but the teaching of Jesus, with its stark and startling message of the kingdom of God, met rabbinical teaching at few common points. Certainly the thinly veiled motive of self-interest in this kind of urging toward philanthropy strikes us as alien to the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.[58] He rather said, "When you give alms, sound no trumpets before you . . . do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing . . . ."[59] True, there may seem to be some affinity with such sayings about "treasure in the heavens" as Luke 12 33, 34 (cf. Matt 6 19–21); but the thrust of these sayings is to focus the disciple's interest and concern on the kingdom of God, and not on making friends for himself in the hope that such friends may help him to gain access to the kingdom. The conclusion remains that self-interested philanthropy stands in jarring contrast to the general tone of Jesus' teaching.[60] The attempt to

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afford scope for the play of the highest class of motives." Buttrick, (*Interpreter's Bible*, 8, p. 284) holds that the parable "recommends not a shrewdly calculating charity, but a life lived in compassion and in sight of eternity." Cf. earlier opinion of R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of our Lord* (pop. ed. 1950), p. 159. Weatherhead (*op. cit.*, p. 230) suggests that "the humor of Jesus comes in here."

[55] Thus Bruce, *ibid.*, pp. 358 f.; Creed, *op. cit.*, pp. 201 f., and (quoting Wellhausen) on 204, 205; Lawrence M. Friedel, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 3 (Oct., 1941), p. 346; Gilmour, *op. cit.*, p. 283; Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 209. Jeremias (*op. cit.*, pp. 34–36) takes it so, while attributing the application to the early church, not Jesus.

[56] Cf. Barclay, *op. cit.*, pp. 216 f.

[57] Thus Marcus Dods (*The Parables of our Lord*, pp. 371 f.) ventures to assert that "the power of wealth does not terminate with this world." The wealthy "can so invest it that the interest shall be paid them as regularly in the world to come as here."

[58] It is one of Dodd's principles for the interpretation of parables that "The meaning which we attribute to the parable . . . must be such as to fit the general view of His (Jesus') teaching to which a study of the non-parabolic sayings leads" (*op. cit.*, p. 19).

[59] Matt 6 2, 3.

[60] Bruce (*Parab. Teaching*, p. 357) refers to this as a "low-toned, unheroic sentiment," saying that if he felt nothing more were meant he would agree with Keim (*Jesu von Nazara*, II, p. 401) that "such a gross morality of prudence never came from the lips of Jesus." J. B. Phillips, in a valuable note to his translation, remarks: "Most commentators suggest that the lesson to be learned is that the follower of Christ should be as shrewd about his spiritual future as the rascally steward was about his own immediate security. Personally, I do not feel satisfied with this view as it introduces a note of careful calculation for the future which is quite at variance with Christ's teaching elsewhere. Moreover, the passage in question goes on to state categorically that dishonesty in earthly things is bound to mean dishonesty in the greater, or spiritual, things, and this seems a very odd conclusion to be drawn from the parable!

"I am myself somewhat attracted by the suggestion of Professor C. C. Torrey, who

reconcile it has led interpreters into some surprising theological vagaries.[61]

Sometimes it is pointed out that Luke has placed the parable of Dives and Lazarus immediately after the Unjust Steward. Here was the story of a wealthy man who failed to bless the poor. But quite apart from any discussion of the real point of Dives and Lazarus, it should be enough of a corrective to observe that Lazarus, in the afterlife, is represented as speaking no word either for or against the rich man; nor does he indeed have the ability to help Dives with so much as a drop of water. It is strange to find interpreters, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, advocating a view of vs. 9 of the Unjust Steward which involves not only a quite self-interested form of philanthropy, but also the effective intercession of the saints.[62] We remember that in the graphic portrayal of the Last Judgment (Matt 25 31–46) the blessed dead protest to the King. They had done their good deeds spontaneously, as it were, with no remotest thought of claiming some eternal interest through them. And on the other side, when the King accepts these blessed dead, it is because he appropriates to himself the acts of kindness they had done to "one of the least of these my brethren."

Thielicke casts such a scene in effectively modern terms, in his sermon on the Unjust Steward. He imagines the cause of an arraigned soul being pleaded by some other, perhaps even "from the nethermost pit of hell." " 'He once gave me his last penny. He once shared his last cigarette with me in prison. He once put me on my feet again when I was a refugee, even though it was hard on his meager resources.' "[63] So, he suggests, those whom one has befriended by means of the unrighteous

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was a specialist in Semitic Languages at Yale University, that the original words of Jesus were spoken in Aramaic, and suffered some alterations when written down in Greek. Professor Torrey, in his own translation, makes the two difficult remarks in verses 8 and 9 into questions, viz., "Did the lord of the estate praise his faithless manager . . . and do *I* say to *you* . . .?' " After offering an alternate translation of vss. 8–13 on this basis, Phillips somewhat reluctantly concludes, "But to be fair to the Greek that we possess, one cannot translate the statements by questions, and I have therefore tried to make the best of it by suggesting that our Lord says, in effect, that the Christian must "outsmart" the "smart" by turning money, which has so many potentialities for evil, into a spiritual opportunity. But this still leaves the following verses about faithfulness rather 'in the air' " (*The Gospels translated into Modern English*, pp. 250 f.).

[61] Bruce (*Parab. Teaching*, p. 373) states of Jesus, "There was no man, in His view, however degraded, sordid, and even unrighteous his life had been, who could not redeem the past and insure the future by a wise, beneficent use of his means." Oesterley (*op. cit.*, pp. 196, 200) slides over the difficulty by simply setting vs. 9 in a fixed parallelism with vss. 10 ff.

[62] Thus Buttrick, *Parables*, p. 125; G. Campbell Morgan, *The Parables and Metaphors of Our Lord*, p. 220; Stoll, *op. cit.*, p. 26; Hillyer H. Straton, *A Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, pp. 152 f. Cf. also Dods, *op. cit.*, p. 376; Wm. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 184; Charles H. Pickar, "The Unjust Steward," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 1 (July, 1939), p. 252.

[63] *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

mammon will be the means for one's being received into the eternal habitations. The ethic is attractive, but the theology shaky. It is interesting that Thielicke himself seems to gainsay his earlier position when he exhorts in conclusion:

> Let us therefore hallow the unrighteous mammon by the use we make of it. Let us not make of it a god, an idol, but a servant. In the last analysis there is only one thing in life that matters: the final security, the eternal habitations which the Cross of our Lord has secured for us .... Our admission to the eternal habitation has been paid. Everything else passes away, but that remains ....[64]

III

Irony is the key which, as I see it, unlocks the riddle of the Unjust Steward.[65] There are evidences elsewhere in the gospel tradition that Jesus spoke ironically on occasion. It was remembered, and apparently as a key saying, how he had once answered his Pharisaic critics. Mark has the saying, which Matthew and Luke reproduce; in all three Synoptics it comes as the climax of Jesus' first clash with the opposition. Being criticized for eating with the tax collector Levi (or Matthew) and his friends, Jesus replies, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2 17). Luke adds only the explanatory phrase "to repentance" after "sinners"; but Matthew gives the saying still more of an edge by inserting, after the first part, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' "[66] No one can seriously maintain that Jesus' obvious reference to his critics, pretentiously "clean" and "righteous" as they were, meant that he actually regarded them as standing in no need of healing or of his call. The statement is ironical, a recognition, not without pathos, of their unwillingness to be healed or called and hence of their inaccessibility.

Again there is a somewhat similar saying in Luke's fifteenth chapter, close to the parable of the Unjust Steward. Both Luke and Matthew give the parable of the Lost Sheep,[67] although Luke's presentation is more detailed and more vivid. It is in Luke's version that, in conclusion, Jesus states, "Even so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Matthew's use of the parable is to emphasize the value of "one of these little ones"; but Luke places it also in a context of Pharisaic controversy, so that the conclusion is leveled at the Pharisees.

[64] *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

[65] While I have not found such an exegesis proposed elsewhere, it is interesting to note that Weatherhead mentions the "kindly light of humor" in connection with the parable (*op. cit.*, p. 229) and Hunter speaks of "occasional flashes of irony and humor" (*op. cit.*, p. 18).

[66] Luke 5 31 f.; Matt 9 12 f.

[67] Luke 15 3–7; Matt 18 12–14.

Who are the "ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance"? Plainly the reference is ironical. Before God there are none such; but there are those who think themselves righteous and who despise "sinners."

Now in the parable of the Unjust Steward, an intriguing story is told centering around a very earthy character. As we have earlier noted, it may well be that behind this story lies some real-life happening, possibly even an incident which aroused the disciples' "righteous" indignation, and which may have reached the ears of Jesus in such a context. The original context is lost, but not so the element of surprise in Jesus' superbly economical telling (or retelling) of the story.

The first surprise comes in vs. 8a. We have seen how it is not now possible to say with assurance whether the "lord" referred to is the master of the parable or Jesus himself. Either way, the surprise is that the steward is congratulated on his stratagem.

Then comes vs. 8b, echoing the adverb of 8a by using the comparative adjective: the "sons of this world" are *φρονιμώτεροι* (wiser, shrewder, more astute) in their own age or generation than are the "sons of light." Something has been said above about the possibility of *φρόνιμος* being used in a slightly derogatory sense. In the present context, may it not have an ironical edge? The sons of this world are shrewd; they are sharp and clever in a way which those who are sons of light are not to envy, and even less to try to emulate. You cannot keep pace with the cleverness, the kind of astutely self-interested dealing admired in the present world, and still be a citizen of the kingdom of God. The two do not mix. Jesus makes the point ironically; then he makes it in very explicit and unmistakable statement.

His irony is the second surprise of the parable.[68] In vs. 9 he makes a statement which seems puzzlingly out of character. But is there not a clue provided in the contrast of two curiously assorted expressions within this one saying: *τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας* and *τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς*? The friends whom Jesus' hearers are encouraged to make are to be secured by the means of the "mammon of unrighteousness." It can hardly be mistaken that the scornful Semitism implies a scornful reference to the stratagem of the steward of the parable. What kind of friends are these, who are bought by such a device?[69] In startling contrast, the friends so secured are supposed to receive one into the "eternal tents," no less! Some charming things have been written about the juxtaposition of antithetical ideas here: eternal tents, the transitory and the

[68] It will be noted that we take the position that vs. 9 belongs integrally with the parable, a possibility already discussed above.

[69] As one notes, it is not of great importance for the meaning of the parable whether one consider, in the light of Oriental custom, that the steward was here cheating his master or not. Either way, he was certainly trying to buy friends against his coming evil day.

abiding.[70] In Jesus' phrase what stands out is the contrast between this (perhaps somewhat poetic) reference to the real world of the kingdom of God and his reference to the mammon which is to fail (along with those who use it). How can any friends, made by means of such earthy pelf, stand to receive one into the eternal abode? It is not that money is tainted, that mammon is inherently wicked.[71] The irony of Jesus' play on the story of the parable is simply the utter irrelevance of the two concepts, mammon and its absorbing concerns over against the dwellings of God. "Make friends for yourselves," he seems to taunt; "imitate the example of the steward; use the unrighteous mammon; surround yourselves with the type of insincere, self-interested friendship it can buy; how far will this carry you when the end comes and you are finally dismissed?"[72]

Some interpreters, notably A. T. Cadoux, looking for a possible *Sitz im Leben Jesu* for the parable, have suggested that it was originally spoken against some particular group. They thus agree in finding a negative meaning in the parable, rather than any positive one. Cadoux' suggested target is the Jerusalem high priesthood,[73] much as the preceding group of three parables (Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Prodigal Son) is directed at the Pharisees, while Dives and Lazarus, which follows, ends with a keen and prophetic thrust at both Pharisees and Sadducees: "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead."

Our parable echoes the urgency and the radical demand which are characteristic of Jesus' teaching, particularly in this central section of Luke's gospel. Perhaps it was even from the time of its early oral tradition that the church lost the ironical tone of the parable, and specifically

[70] Is there perhaps an appeal to simplicity, an echo of Israel's nostalgic recollection of her wilderness youth as a nation, such as one finds in Hos 2 14 f.? Cf. Bruce, *Parab. Teaching*, p. 370.

[71] Some interpreters consider that Jesus' expression implies a reference to wealth illegitimately acquired (cf. Bruce, *Parab. Teaching*, p. 374, also *Exp. Gr. Test.*, I, p. 586; T. W. Manson, *op. cit.*, pp. 292 f.; and especially, Kendall, *op. cit.*, pp. 133 f.); others find the expression simply to refer to the generally tainted character of money (cf. Wm. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 184).

[72] J. B. Phillips (following C. C. Torrey) comes closest to such an interpretation when he suggests that the meaning of the passage would be made clearer if vss. 8a and 9 were read as questions. (See n. 60 above.) The interrogative and the ironical affirmative challenge the hearer in much the same way.

[73] *Op. cit.*, pp. 135–137; cf. Dodd, *op. cit.*, pp. 17 f., who also suggests the Sadducaic priesthood. C. W. F. Smith, referring to Cadoux, builds up an interesting, if not altogether convincing, case for interpreting the parable as referring to the failure and bankruptcy of Israel herself, "an ironic and sad reflection . . . of Jesus' concern about the inevitable fate of his people." Smith concludes, as we have, that "We must assume here an ironic tone in Jesus' teaching which is not entirely lacking elsewhere" (*op. cit.*, pp. 212 f.).

of vs. 9, and began to try to read the saying with a "straight" meaning, with such difficulties as have been experienced ever since. Jeremias reminds us that, apart from the original *Sitz im Leben* of the parables and before they assumed written form, ". . . they 'lived' in the primitive Church, of whose proclamations, preaching, and teaching, the words of Jesus were the content, in its missionary activities, in its assemblies, or in its catechetical instruction."[74] Yet we have the impression that Luke (or his source) still conserved the sense of the original, ironical thrust of the parable. He has given it a setting in which it is followed directly by the straightforward, unmistakable teaching of vss. 10–13. This teaching has to do with the demand of the gospel, and it shares the radical, uncompromising quality of many of Jesus' words about the kingdom of God.[75]

As has been earlier discussed, vs. 10 has the form of a popular aphorism: "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest . . . ." Vss. 11 and 12, however, narrow the focus down to a direct reference to the parable and an application of its lesson (in the reverse form of a warning) to Jesus' disciples. The kingdom of God is not so otherworldly that it has nothing to do with the goods of this world. Rather the disciple, who need not suppose that he can compete with the "sons of this world" in their type of "astuteness," is to show himself honest and "faithful" in the "unrighteous mammon," the alien substance belonging to another, so that in due time he may be entrusted with "the true riches," the real wealth, "that which is your own."[76]

Thus Luke appropriately draws together the whole passage, which began with the parable itself and which has consistently developed one single theme, by the use, in conclusion, of Jesus' pointed *logion*, "No servant can serve two masters . . . ." The single theme expressed with quizzical humor and telling irony, and then in the contrasts of Semitic aphorism, is a demand for faithfulness and obedience, particularly in face of the corrosive influence of ὁ μαμωνᾶς τῆς ἀδικίας. It is a timely message for the church, including the present church as she tries to witness to an affluent society.

[74] *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

[75] Thus T. W. Manson: "The service of God and mammon is impossible, because their demands on man are irreconcilable. God calls for the utmost of self-dedication and self-sacrifice: mammon for self-assertion and self-aggrandisement. The only way for disciples is complete devotion to God, and this is not possible unless they are prepared to sit loose to all the things that human selfishness counts as goods" (*op. cit.*, p. 133). Cf. Wm. Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 184; Creed, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

[76] Perhaps, as has been suggested (Bruce, *Parab. Teaching*, p. 356; cf. Frederick W. Danker, "Luke 16:16 — an Opposition Logion," *JBL*, 77 [Sept. 1958], pp. 232 f.), Luke put the parable in right here because of the relation of the selfish, "squandering" (διασκορπίζων) steward to the Prodigal Son who "squandered" (διεσκόρπισεν) his father's wealth. On the other side, its emphasis on the deceptive unreality of this world's mammon points on to the following parable, Dives and Lazarus, in which one looks back on this world from the state after death.