

ON THE INJUSTICE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD: LK 16:1-13

The literature dealing with the parable of the unjust steward is staggering,¹ and after all the effort expended, its meaning still eludes us.² Indeed, more than any other parable it can be expected to keep its mystery for future generations of exegetes, for it bristles with difficulties.³ Nevertheless, a few years ago a German exegete, writing in an obscure publication, made what I

¹A brief selection of the articles which seem most significant to me: M. D. Gibson, "On the Parable of the Unjust Steward," *ExpT* 14 (1902s) 334; H. Preisker, "Lc 16, 1-7," *TLZ* 74 (1949) 85-92; P. Gaechter, "The Parable of the Dishonest Steward after Oriental Conceptions," *CBQ* 12 (1950) 121-131; G. Gander, "Le procédé de l'économe infidèle, décrit Lc 16, 5-7, est-il répréhensible ou louable?" *Verbum Caro* 27s (1953) 128-141; A. Descamps, "La composition littéraire de Lc XVI, 9-13," *NovT* 1 (1956) 47-53; J.D.M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on Lk 16, I: The Parable of the Unjust Steward: is Irony the Key?" *JBL* 82 (1963) 15-30; F. E. Williams, "Is Almsgiving the Point of the 'Unjust Steward'?" *JBL* 83 (1964) 293-297; J. Fitzmyer, "The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:1-13)," *TS* 25 (1964) 23-42; F. J. Moore, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *ATR* 47 (1965) 103-105; P. Bigo, "La richesse comme intendance, dans l'Évangile. A propos de Luc 16:1-9," *NRT* 87 (1965) 267-271; M. Kraemer, "Aenigma parabolae de villico iniquo Lc 16, 1-13," *VD* 46 (1968) 370-375; R. H. Hiers, "Friends by Unrighteous Mammon. The Eschatological Proletariat (Lk 16:9)," *JAAR* 38 (1970) 30-36; M. Ledrus, "Il fattore infedele (Lc 16, 1-9). Stralciato de uno studio in preparazione sulla modestia (epikeia) evangelistica," *Pal Cler* 50 (1971) 978-982; J. D. M. Derrett, " 'Take thy bond. . . and Write Fifty' (Luke xvi. 6). The Nature of the Bond," *JTS* 23 (1972) 438-440. (Bibliographical note: in this article references to standard commentaries in Lk, *ad loc.*, will be made by citing the author's name alone.)

²In general, there have been two approaches: Derrett's studies developed the line of reasoning of Gibson, Gaechter, and Gander, that the practice of the steward in the Near East was not to receive a salary, but to charge a fee for interest and insurance (Hellenistic practice, but against Jewish Law), some or all of which he would get. When told he had to leave, the steward simply settled with the owner's debtors without taking his fee. Thus the lord of the parable could praise him for his postponement of immediate gratification in order to gain later employment. Fitzmyer also follows this lead. Others have developed a line of thought according to which to give money to those hard-pressed is to use (God's) money properly; cf. Williams, Moore, Bigo, Kraemer, Hiers.

³Not only is it difficult to determine what is the conclusion of the parable, but there seem to be two or three different applications or interpretations to the text. Further (and this is the major stumbling block, to which neither of the two foregoing approaches have satisfactorily addressed themselves), how can an *unjust* steward be praised?

consider an illuminating contribution to the central problem of the parable.⁴ It is to publicize his work, as well as to fit it into a redaction-critical context, that the present article is written.

A. The Parable (Lk 16:1-8a)

Vss. 1-7 develop the action of the parable. Jesus turns to the disciples and tells them a parable of a rich man who had a steward⁵ charged⁶ with squandering⁷ his property. He summoned his servant and commanded him to put the books in order, as he was fired.⁸ After some deliberation, the steward decided on a stratagem to avoid becoming a physical laborer or a beggar. He invited his owner's debtors in (according to his ordinary duties), and had them rewrite their promissory notes⁹ at a lesser amount. Some consider this the end of the parable: Jesus stepped outside of the narrative form to give his

⁴Fritz Maass, "Das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Haushalter. Lukas 16, 1-8" *Theologie Viatorum* 8 (Jahrbuch der kirchlichen Hochschule; Berlin, 1961s) 173-184. Not only has there been no comment on Maass's contribution in the English literature, but even Kraemer, who writes in German, missed the article. (It was, however, noted by argus-eyed P. Nober in *Elenchus Bibliographicus* 44 in *Bib* 44 (1963) 122*.) Maass calls attention to the fact that the steward is called unjust by the lord precisely in the act of praising him (vs. 8), and then proceeds to speak of forgiveness in a way which seems "unjust" to ordinary human judgment as the most profound meaning of the parable. (I owe my own acquaintance with the article to Q. Quesnell, who called it to the attention of his seminar on Lk-Acts at Marquette University.)

⁵In the OT and rabbinic literature, God is the householder, Moses his steward. NT usage has resonances of this *ben bayit* in parable usage; cf. Lk 12:42ff. and 16:1-8, a steward from among the slaves who has charge of the owner's household (*therapeia*) and property (*hyparchonta*). Early Christianity considered the *oikonomoi* as the apostles (1 Cor 4:1), and later the bishop is the steward (Tit 1:7); cf. O. Michel, "oikonomos" in *TDNT* V, p. 149ff. Derrett, "Fresh Light," showed that the Jewish steward was a member of the household and by the Jewish law of agency had perfect identification with the principal in acting on his behalf.

⁶*diaballein* means "to bring charges with a hostile intent" (Arndt-Gingrich, *Lexicon* 180), and seems to indicate a kind of juridical procedure. The accusation came from others—cf. 16:2 *akouo*. Perhaps it was from the other servants as in Mt 18:31?

⁷*diaskorpizein* ordinarily means "to scatter, disperse," used of persons (cf. Lk 1:51). When used of property (only here and in Lk 15:13 in the NT), it means "to waste, squander" (Arndt-Gingrich, *Lexicon* 187). Thus it does not necessarily indicate criminal malice, "injustice."

⁸Plummer thinks the *apodos ton logon* means that the steward has a chance to prove himself innocent by his bookkeeping; although he knows he cannot do that, the steward remains in office for a while. This does not seem congruent with the definitive *ou gar dynē, eti oikonomein*. The steward is dismissed, but he acts as steward until he gets the books in order for his successor; cf. Grundmann.

⁹Whether they rewrote previous notes or wrote new ones is immaterial. According to the line of thought of Gibson, *et al.*, the steward is foregoing a fee which is his (or at least not the master's) in order to reduce the amount of the note. The owner will still get his fair share.

own application.¹⁰ However, I would prefer, with Fitzmyer, to understand the first application as part (the ending) of the parable itself.¹¹

B. The Various Applications of the Parable (16:8a-13)¹²

Vs. 8a is the conclusion of the parable itself: the steward's master praised him.¹³ This indicates that the stratagem was successful; he has been received

¹⁰J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (ET S. H. Hooke; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963) 45, Preisker, "Lc 16, 1-7," col. 89, Leaney, and Grundmann take vs. 8 as Jesus' words, and so the parable has ended. Most of the commentators find the theological terminology "sons of light" foreign to the tone of the parable. Since vs. 8b, then, belongs to Jesus, he must be the lord of 8a. Jeremias gives four arguments for taking Jesus as *ho kyrios*: (1) How could the owner praise the one who had cheated him? (Now this argument depends on verisimilitude, but the whole parable strains verisimilitude. How could the steward expect others to accept him as friend or employ him as steward when his very act of ingratiating himself was a betrayal of stewardship?); (2) Lucan use of *ho kyrios* absolutely refers to Jesus; (3) there is a similar pattern in 18:6; (4) this usage would be following a literary form where a parable ends with a word of Jesus to the audience (cf. Lk 14:11, 24). A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM Press, 1964) 67, Rengstorf, Grundmann, Ellis agree with this argumentation wholly or in part.

¹¹Fitzmyer, "Dishonest," p. 27f. refutes Jeremias' arguments point by point. Further, he points out that without the reaction of the owner in 8a the parable itself has no ending. We have awaited a conclusion since vs. 2, are waiting to see if the steward's plan proved successful. The owner's approbation in 8a answers that question. Further, in vs. 9 *kai egō legō hymin* clearly shifts the subject to Jesus and gives *his* interpretation. Jeremias had attempted to scotch this argument, but gave no reason. Against him, note that of the 42 uses of *legō (soi) hymin* in Lk, only two (11:9; 16:9) have *egō*. Although in 11:9 the *egō* does not involve a change of subject (Jesus had been speaking in 11:8, *legō hymin*), here the shift from a third person to first person does seem to indicate an emphatic change of person, something akin to the notion of special contrast employed in Mt 5:22-44. R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (ET John Marsh; Oxford: Blackwell, 1963) 175f. distinguishes between the original end of the parable in vs. 7 and Luke's making vs. 8 a part of the parable. Lagrange, Creed, Kraemer, "Aenigma," p. 373f., and Descamps, "Composition," p. 47 also understand the *kyrios* as the owner of the parable.

¹²C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Fontana Books, 1963) 26, "notes for the three separate sermons on the parable as text."

¹³Jeremias had asked how the master could praise him. For those who hold Derrett's explanation, the answer is simple: the steward has not wronged the master, for the extra foodstuffs were not rightfully his under God's law (as usurious) anyway. In fact, the master simply affirmed what his steward had done (*fait accompli*) and took credit himself for generosity and piety! Maass, "Haushalter," p. 179 points out that *decisively* against the interpretation of Gander (that the extra money belonged to the steward himself) is the fact that the debt is clearly owed the lord in vss. 5, 7. Further, the Derrett explanation ignored the fact that in the very act of the lord's praising him, he calls him an unjust steward. *Ton oikonomon tēs adikias* is probably a characterizing genitive, probably to translate the Semitic construct state; cf. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Tr. R. W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) (hereafter *BDF*) #165, p. 91, Plummer,

by one of the creditors. The motive for the praise¹⁴ is the master's admiration of the steward's prudence, for he took stock of a dangerous situation, mustered all his acumen, and acted decisively. I believe this was the meaning of the parable in the earliest tradition, whether it goes back to the historical Jesus or the earliest stage of the oral tradition.¹⁵ There is an application implicit in this for the Church, but the early tradition¹⁶ did not leave it implicit, expanding it by "for the sons of this world are wiser¹⁷ in their own generation than the sons of light in theirs." Thus Christians also are to act decisively.¹⁸

Grundmann. A similar expression occurs in Lk 16:9; 18:6. (A possibility which Plummer alludes to, and which had spontaneously occurred to me, is that this might be a genitive of cause after a verb of praising [cf. H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1920), #1505, p. 330f.; *BDF* #176, p. 96]; as far as I know only S. Antoniadis, *L'Évangile de Luc. esquisse de Grammaire et de Style* [Paris: Collection de l'Institut Néo-Hellénique, 1930] 376ff. has taken this possibility seriously. If this were indeed the construction, it would eliminate any possibility of the Derrett explanation). Fitzmyer develops Derrett's suggested solution: this use of unjust refers to the steward's activity before the parable begins ("Dishonest," p. 32f.), but this is not convincing. In the first place, although *diablēthē* seems to indicate some kind of criminal action, the steward is nevertheless not explicitly called "unjust" in vs. 2. The possibility remains that he could have been inexperienced or careless. At any rate, the point of "injustice" is not made clearly enough so that vs. 8 can be a reference back to a known quality of the steward. Secondly, we know which steward is being referred to in vs. 8 and a characterizing genitive is not needed unless something in vss. 2-7 had helped take the *adikias* as something central to the interpretation of the parable. Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 181 presumes a further instance of the steward's fraudulent activity.

¹⁴*hoti*, taken causally, indicates prudence as the reason for praise.

¹⁵Jeremias understands it as "deal with the imminent eschatological crisis courageously, wisely, resolutely" (*Parables*, pp. 47, 182); Hunter, "Would that my men were as 'savvy' " (*Interpreting*, p. 104). Obviously, the more one identifies Jesus as the preacher of the imminent inbreaking of the kingdom, the more likely one finds this as his historical message.

¹⁶The "sons of light" seems to be a Palestinian expression (I, QM 1, 1, 3, 9, etc.; *Eth En* 108, 11), and so the Jewish Christian community probably added the phrase to make explicit the application to the Christian's need for decisive activity in the eschatological crisis as they understood it.

¹⁷*phronimos* does not ordinarily indicate a Christian virtue in the NT, but ordinary human prudence; cf. Mt 7:24; 10:16; 24:45; 25:2-9, all used in figures (as are Lk 12:42; 16:8). Paul is actually inimical to this quality in Rom 11:25; 12:16; 1 Cor 4:10; 2 Cor 11:19; only 1 Cor 10:15 would be capable of interpretation as a Christian virtue. However, in the figures it is the virtue of one who has grasped the eschatological situation; cf. Preisker, "Lc 16, 1-7," col. 89.

¹⁸Thus the parable does not give an example (of injustice) to follow, "but a 'real life' illustration from which a lesson can be learned," Ellis. The Lord exhorts his followers to a similar self-interest, but in view of inheriting the kingdom. Plummer, "The believer ought to exhibit similar prudence in using material advantages in this life. . ."; cf. also Zahn and Klostermann for this interpretation. Note that whereas the Derrett explanation had denied there was any injustice in the steward's action, this interpretation simply overlooks the injustice, and focuses on the human virtue in the steward's activity. That kind of single-mindedness, exercised in pursuit of the kingdom, is seen as the great virtue needed in the present crisis.

Vs. 9, however, is Luke's own conclusion.¹⁹ He adds,²⁰ "And I²¹ tell you, make friends²² for yourselves of the mammon of iniquity,²³ so that when it fails they may receive²⁴ you into the eternal tents." Thus Luke means by the parable that the unjust man can show the Christian how to use riches to help the poor and so gain God's favor. Now this focus on the use of money is probably the reason for the adjoining verses on the mammon of iniquity, and so the proper use of money is an important part of the Lucan version of the parable.

How does one know, however, that the use of the mammon of iniquity which makes friends for eternity is by giving *to the poor*? There are three

¹⁹Cf. Bultmann's ". . . man selbst von der Schlaueheit eines Betrügers lernen kann; aber in welcher Richtung?" *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1921) 216. Note that, as Creed, and before him Holtzmann (*Die Synoptiker. Handcommentar zum Neuen Testament* I, 1 [Freiburg im B.: J. C. B. Mohr, 1892]) says, "it is v. 9 which introduces the idea of the use of wealth into the application."

²⁰*hymn* before *lego* is Lucan (Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 45). Note the parallel between vs. 4 *dexōntai me eis. . . hina hotan metastathō* and vs. 9 *dexōntai hymas eis. . . hina hotan eklipē*, seen by Bigo, "Richesse," p. 267, and Hiers, "Friends," p. 32. Further, Hiers points out parallels between vs. 8 and 9; although he takes these as indications that vs. 9 was originally part of the parable. I take them to be signs of artistic editing.

²¹Luke now makes clear that the *kyrios* is the owner of the parable, and gives his own message in Jesus' words here; cf. n. 11.

²²The friends can be (1) angels, according to Grundmann, quoting *Pir Ab* IV, 11; *Tos Pea* 2, 21, and this would be coherent with the plural of divinity in *dexōntai* (Ellis, G. V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (London: S. P. C. K., 1964) 77), as they would be God's agents; (2) the almsdeeds themselves personified, according to Williams, "Almsgiving," p. 295, utilizing the same *Pir Ab* IV, 11, plus *Bab Bat* 10a, and other rabbinic evidence (cf. also Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 96); (3) the poor helped by the almsgiving, Plummer, Hiers, "Friends," pp. 34-36, who indicates it is the poor who will populate the kingdom in Lk, and so those who help them will please God and find the same poor welcoming them into the blessed abode of the kingdom. I find this last well-argued and preferable, especially since it fits the parable imagery, where those forgiven are presumably those who do the receiving.

²³Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 46 finds this "ill-gotten gains," and so he thinks the parable is addressed to those people classed as dishonest. I find this strained. Although Plummer was right that the word mammon is neither OT nor rabbinic, it does appear in 1QS 6:2; I Q27, I, ii, 5; CD 14:20 (cf. Fitzmyer, "Dishonest," p. 30). It seems to be derived from Heb. *mn* "to trust in," F. Hauck, "*mamōnas*" in *TDNT* IV, p. 388, and so involves a pun on *pistos* in vs. 10. (R. Caemmerer, "Investment for Eternity. A Study of Lk 16:1-13," *CTM* [1963] 69-76 deals with the pun, and G. Gamps and B. Ubach, "Un sentido biblico de *adikos, adikia* y la interpretacion de Lc 16, 1-13," *Est Bib* 25 [1966] 75-82 develop it well, though their main thesis—that those who possess riches should be unfaithful to their master (riches), and so serve God—seems fanciful.) Mammon, therefore, means that money of this world which has no value of itself for eternity.

²⁴Even if the plural refers to the poor (cf. n. 22), nevertheless, they act in conjunction with God (as executors, etc.) and so the plural can serve as the equivalent of the theological passive.

arguments: (1) Lk 16:19-31 teaches the necessity of sharing with the poor in order to be received into Abraham's bosom;²⁵ (2) the parallel with Lk 12:33;²⁶ (3) the general treatment of riches in Lk-Acts.²⁷ Finally, Williams, "Almsgiving," p. 294, finds a theological notion that almsgiving is distributing God's property in Jewish thought (although he cites only *Pir Ab* III, 7 as a comment on 1 Chr 29:14), and, therefore, in Jewish Christian consciousness.

If this, then, is the meaning of the parable for Luke, how does the injustice of the steward contribute to the message? To answer, we must pay special attention to the Lucan context and then to the arguments of Maass.

C. The Context of the Parable (Lk 14:25-17:10)

1. *Proximate Context:* Spatially, we are still on the journey which began (again) in 14:25 (*syneporeuonto*), and we will be there until the next spatial indicator in 17:11.²⁸ Luke begins with a passage on the cost of discipleship (14:25-33) demanding detachment from this world's loves and concerns (14:26, 33). Then ch. 15 gives three parables on rejoicing in forgiveness of one another as God rejoices in forgiving. Then comes our parable of the unjust steward, addressed to the disciples, probably as a specific application of the message just given.²⁹ After our parable, 16:14-31 speaks of the danger of

²⁵We indicate (n. 30) that Lk 16:14 was redactional by nature, tying 16:1-13 to 16:19-31. 16:19 begins in exactly the same words as 16:1b, *anthrōpos tis en plousios*. In the second parable Lazarus does nothing especially good, except to be poor; this seems a foil to the rich man, who does nothing bad, except for continuing to enjoy his riches while someone else was going hungry (vs. 25). This is the only reason given for the chasm between Lazarus in Abraham's bosom and the rich man in Hades; cf. Hiers, "Friends," p. 34. Note also that the rich man expects that his brothers can do something to avoid his fate. The response is that they should listen to Moses and the prophets. The law and the prophets were given in 16:14-16 in the context of riches, perhaps to indicate that the law also told one to use money for others (Dt 14:28f.; 15:1-11 [giving to the poor joined to forgiveness]; 24:10-15; 25:13-19). What Lk 16:19-31 says is that if you would reach the heavenly dwellings you must give to the poor, the same message we postulate for 16:9.

²⁶Again Hiers, "Friends," p. 33 has developed this parallel: 12:33 *polēsate ta hyparchonta*. . . *poiēsate heautois*. . . *anekleipton*; 16:9 (16:1) *ta hyparchonta*. . . *heautois poiēsate*. . . *eklipē*. Note that these elements in 12:33, compared to Mt 6:19f., are redactional in Lk. The parallel would appear to be conscious. Further, one can see on examination that structurally and theologically 12:33 is a development of the idea in 12:21, that being rich towards God is giving alms to the poor.

²⁷This is the theme of Lk 14:13f.; 19:8; 10:34f.; cf. further 6:24f.; 12:15ff.; 16:19-31; 18:34f. The same idea is in Acts 2:44f.; 4:32, 34f.

²⁸Luke has broken the passage into briefer sections by means of different audiences: crowds in 14:25, Pharisees in 15:1, disciples in 16:1, Pharisees in 16:14, disciples in 17:1.

²⁹The turn to the disciples often in Lk (cf. 10:22; 12:1, 22; 17:22) indicates a specific application of the message just given, or at least some connection with it. Ch. 15, then, would be the immediate context and influence the meaning of 16:1-13.

being lovers of money, and of not using it for the poor, and of not believing the message of him who returned from the dead.³⁰ Then 17:1-4 speaks of forgiving sinners, 5-6 of faith, and 7-11 of forgiveness in faith³¹ as the duty of the Christian.³² Therefore large parts of this block speak of love of neighbor expressed in generosity with money (16:1-31) and forgiveness (15:1-32; 17:1-4).³³ And so as we begin our parable we might expect it to develop such themes, and especially the forgiveness just spoken of in the immediately preceding parables of ch. 15.

2. *Immediate Context:* Not only does ch. 13 immediately precede our parable, but there are textual indications that 12:1-13 is tied to ch. 15; (a.) The one scene for these four parables is set in 15:1-2 in the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes over Jesus' reception of publicans and sinners. There is no new description of the action in 16:1 (not even so much as a scene continuation, as in 16:14); (b.) Thus *elegen de* in 16:1 (as a turn to the disciples, n. 29) expresses continuity with what went before. This is obviously true of the conjunction *de*, but also true of the imperfect tense;³⁴

³⁰Most commentators (cf. Plummer, Rengstorf, Grundmann, Fitzmyer, "Dishonest," p. 26) see a unit on the use of wealth in 16:1-31. This certainly does seem a part of the Lucan editorial intent, as *philargyroi* in 16:14 does not have immediate application to vss. 15-18, and so is redactional in nature, linking 16:1-13 to 16:19-31, where vs. 19 begins with *anthrōpos. . . tis en plousios*, almost identical with the beginning of 16:1. (16:15-18, then, are fitted into the general meaning by saying, "The Law and the Prophets ask you to give money away [cf. v. 31, "Moses and the prophets"].)

³¹This interpretation depends on seeing vs. 5 as the disciples' understanding that the superabundant forgiveness demanded in 17:3-4 is beyond human powers, and can be accomplished only in faith. Jesus responds in vs. 6 that such faith truly is effective (in forgiving or whatever else). Then vss. 7-11 say that such great works done in faith are not cause for special pride or consideration; they are simply the works freely available (and obligatory) to any believing disciple. Obviously vss. 7-11 have no intrinsic reference to faith enabling forgiveness; that is mediated to them by the context.

³²Note that Lk 15:1-7 (//Mt 18:12-14), 17:1-3a (//Mt 18:6f.), and 17:3b-4 (//Mt 18:15) may have originally been in a closer context of forgiveness and generosity to man (in Q). In that sense Mt 18:23-35, the parable of the unforgiving servant, may be the equivalent of Lk 16:1-8, and so whether in Lk or in Mt 18:10-35 (a much tighter unity) these varied pericopes develop a single theme of forgiveness of one another because God is the model of forgiveness and the recipient of anything done to one's fellow man. That theology probably was a part of Luke's own thought in his use of these various passages in a somewhat more disparate way.

³³Forgiveness is one of the most important themes in Lk: cf. 5:17-32; 6:27-42; 7:36-50; 11:1-4, 5-13; (12:57ff.); 14:12-14; 15:1-32; 17:3-4; (18:9-14); 19:1-10; 23:34, 39-43. Therefore the remote context also might inform our passage with a message of forgiveness.

³⁴The pattern *elegen de + parabolēn + audience* occurs in 5:36; 14:7; 18:1, all connected with the preceding discourse, and all nine uses of *elegen de* in Lk seem to connect what follows with what went before.

(c.) There is a certain continuity of form (all parables), and this continuity is stressed by a certain verbal connection: 15:4 (*tis anthrōpos*); 15:8 (*tis gynē*); 15:11 *anthrōpos tis*; 16:1 *anthrōpos tis*; (and 16:19 *anthrōpos tis*).

(d.) *diaskorpizein* is used in its special form of "squandering others' property" only in 15:13 and 16:2 in the whole NT.³⁵

As I hope to show, there is a relationship between the content of these parables: a seeking out, forgiving, reconciling which goes beyond human expectations.³⁶ In 15:4-7 does one really expect a shepherd who has lost 1% of his flock to expose the other 99% to exposure, wandering, wolves, etc., in order to recover the one? Or, more strongly stated in 15:8-10, does one really expect a woman to sweep a whole house until she finds a coin worth 25¢? Or does one expect a father who has been insulted in his person and life-style by a younger son who has squandered all the father has built up to give that son more than a cool welcome (to say nothing of being continually on the lookout for him or providing him with a sumptuous feast) on his return? This kind of action is what God does, not what man can do. And yet Jesus does this himself (and so the Pharisees grumble), and he sets this as an example for his disciples.

But ch. 15 not only inculcates a super-human concern for the lost, it teaches against the mean spirit of men who judge that what is lost deserves to be lost. Men tend to say, "If the sheep cannot follow the herd, good riddance." Certainly the grudging spirit of the older son is one familiar to us all. Most men who have labored to be faithful, "slaving for so many years, never transgressing a command (Lk 15:29)" cry out "Unfair!" when others who have been unfaithful finally return and receive a reward far in excess of what the faithful have experienced. It is precisely on this point of the unfairness that the issue is joined in our parable.

D. The Conception of "Unjust"³⁷

Let us begin from a basic insight that Luke opposes the pharisaic concept

³⁵If this seems a tenuous connection, I would point out that it seems to be a method of redactional linking throughout Lk-Ac. I cite here only 14:10, 15 *synanakeimenōn*, and hope that those who have read extensively in Lk-Acts will recognize the phenomenon, which would require exhaustive treatment.

³⁶I take it for granted that the three parables of ch. 15 are linked together. The particle *ē* coordinates 15:8-10 with 4-7, and the stories are parallel, so that vs. 4 = 8; 5-6 = 9; 7 = 10. The corresponding vocabulary and grammatical structures are so obvious as to make proof here unnecessary. Again in 15:11-32 we deal with one who is lost and then found (15:24), a master who seeks what is lost (implied in 15:20), a calling others together to rejoice in the finding (15:23, 29), and a final joy (*charēnai*; cf. *chara* in 7, 10).

³⁷This is precisely the point on which Maass made his contribution, and the main outlines of the argument which follows are his, pp. 180-184.

of righteousness as exact observance of laws, "justice."³⁸ This opposition is visible in the contrast of the publican and Pharisee (Lk 18:0-14, where the publican is *dedikaiomenos*), but especially in the parable of the prodigal son, where the older brother is indignant at the feast for his brother who has (*unjustly*) squandered his father's wealth. But the father forgives, and this strikes the older brother as somehow "unfair," "unjust."³⁹

Beginning, then, from the hint in Lk 15:11-32 that the forgiving father is God,⁴⁰ one could take the owner in our parable as God. Then all debts are owed Him (as lord of creation). The steward is man as steward of creation.⁴¹ Before the last judgment (vs. 2) he must set all in order. He does so by following the command, "Judge not and you will not be judged. . . forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Lk 6:37), as well as the other command on loans, "and if you loan to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? . . . but. . . loan expecting nothing in return, and great will be your reward, and you will be sons of the most high. . ." (Lk 6:34f.). Stewardship is, then, a good image of the real life situation, for the steward, according to the custom of the time, did act absolutely as the agent of his lord.⁴² In man's real life situation, any debt owed is really owed to God, whose wealth we administer, and any offense against a man is supremely against God as lord of that man's life and dignity. Therefore the man who offends me has offended God, and my forgiveness of him is a forgiveness of an offense against my (and his) Lord,

³⁸A concept not much different from the ordinary human concept of justice as a balance between unjust deed and proportionate retribution.

³⁹One can find further examples of Jesus' opposing the pharisaic concept of the just and fair in his polemic against the Pharisees, Lk 11:37-52, the sabbath healings (Lk 4:31-37, 38; 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:2-6), the salvation of Zacchaeus, whose very profession by pharisaic standards made him a sinner (Lk 19:1-10), and his asking for more than legal observance in 18:18-30. Jesus also overturns normal human expectations of what is "fair" in his advice to those who cannot repay (6:33f.; 14:13f.), and in 10:38-42, where Martha, who worked for the Lord, did not get the better part.

⁴⁰As is explicitly done in the preceding parables (15:7, 10) and so is implicitly understood of Lk 15:11-32. In a way the chief character of this parable is the forgiving owner, as he was the forgiving father and the shepherd and the woman in ch. 15.

⁴¹Cf. Gen 1:28; 2:15, although it must be confessed that there is, so far as I can see, no theology of man as steward of God's creation developed in the OT. In general, man is the one who has squandered God's gifts through sin, and ought to return to his father, who ought not to trust in full barns, who recognizes, like the publican, his need of God's forgiveness, etc. But he is also the one who, like the older brother, can hold forgiveness of another's debts as unfair to himself, and that is the point of the parable here.

⁴²Cf. Gibson, Gaechter, Gander, Derrett, Fitzmyer. Even if we do not accept their vindication of the steward as fundamentally just, we must accept their research indicating that the steward was free to act as the lord's agent, without his further entering into the negotiations, and that what he did was what the lord had to adhere to as done by himself.

who shows himself supremely ready to forgive! Therefore my ready forgiveness is never "injustice" in God's eyes.

This forgiveness fits our parable in four ways:

1. The forgiveness demanded by Jesus is, according to human standards and judgment, "unjust." Judgment is forbidden (Lk 6:37), the Christian must pray for his enemies (6:28), turn the other cheek to the attacker (6:29), give his shirt to one taking his coat (6:29), and not demand what has been stolen (6:30). He must love enemies and be merciful to those who will not repay (6:31-36), just as his Father is merciful (6:36). Yet this outrages human sensibilities, which demand "in justice" that the robber be imprisoned, the assaulter removed from human society, debtors made to pay, etc. "Law must be respected." "You cannot construct a human society on the gospel." Consequently, "laws" like Jesus' violate our human traditions and concepts of the justice of well-ordered society. They are unjust.
2. Man has the authority to forgive debts to God. Every offense against man is also an offense against God. While only God can forgive sins (Lk 5:21; 7:49), Jesus does so, and he gives men the duty to do so (17:4). Yet man cannot undo all the wrong, and the parable reflects this in saying that the steward only lessens the debt, does not erase it.
3. The one who so forgives has the promise of God's forgiveness,⁴³ and so
4. such action does not look for reward from men, but from the Lord (Lk 6:23; 14:12ff.). This is the eschatological reward consistent throughout Lk.⁴⁴

Thus in its final stage our parable teaches a forgiveness which is beyond all human expectation,⁴⁵ and even seems "unjust" by human standards. Just as the father of the prodigal forgave beyond all measure, so is the owner of our parable prepared to forgive (cf. his praise even of the one who has wronged him in vs. 8). Therefore the steward must also forgive the debtors, just as the older son should have forgiven his prodigal brother. As we have already pointed out, this reversal of "unfair" is a consistent theology of Luke, not only in the Sermon on the plain, but also in the story of Martha and Mary, at which the hard-working Christian mother inevitably cries out "not fair" at the reward given to her who merely sits and listens. Further, the same theme occurs throughout the gospel tradition, as for example, in Mt 20:1-16, where the blood of every working man spontaneously boils at the thought of the workers of one hour getting the same wage as those who have borne the heat

⁴³Lk 6:38b; 11:4; cf. the implication of God in 16:9 *dexōntai*.

⁴⁴Whereas Mt 18:21-35 says, "Forgive as you have been forgiven," the corresponding Lk 16:1-9 says, "Forgive that you might be forgiven."

⁴⁵This is also how M. Ledrus, "Fattore," understands the parable: the Church's ministers must, in the sense of 1 Tim 3:2-4, be forbearing.

of the day.⁴⁶ What is fair about the last being first and the first being last? Clearly we must relearn from Jesus what "just" and "unjust" mean.

The forgiveness demanded involves the generous use of money, as is proved by vs. 9 and the following vss. 10-13.⁴⁷ These proverbs indicate in different ways that one who is trustworthy in this world (in little, in unjust mammon, in another's goods) will be entrusted in the next (with much, with true wealth, with one's own possessions). They do not, therefore, cohere with the "unjust," untrustworthy conduct of the steward in vss. 1-8.⁴⁸ Only if "unjust" (unfair) can be seen to conform to a higher justice and trust can these verses apply to our steward. Through vs. 9 they do: the man who uses mammon as a faithful steward to give to the poor,⁴⁹ and who forgives his fellow-debtors all offenses and sins as the merciful God forgives—he is the steward faithful on earth and rewarded in heaven.

E. Conclusions

1. At the earliest stage of our tradition (whether that of the historical Jesus or that of the early Palestinian Church), the parable meant that in the eschatological crisis Christians should muster all their prudence and strength and act decisively to inherit the kingdom (Lk 16:8);
2. At a later stage Luke added his own theology of sharing with the poor as a giving to God (12:21, 33) which merits reward in heaven; the parable then meant that in an eschatological view one must use money to provide for

"It matters not that this is the owner's own money and he can be generous; everyone cries "foul!" I owe this reinforcement of the argument to Rev. Jack Boyle, S.J., of the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley.

⁴⁷The verses might have been added because of the pun on *manōnas/pist-* in vss. 9-12 (cf. Fitzmyer, "Dishonest," p. 29, our n. 23), or because *adikō mamōnē* in vs. 11 forms a *Stichwort* with *mamōnē tēs adikias* in vs. 9 (Rengstorf). One might think that the same Palestinian coloration might mean these verses originally belonged with vs. 8b, but the motivation is entirely different. The thought of these verses rather fits the parable of the talents (Grundmann, Fitzmyer, "Dishonest," p. 29).

⁴⁸Yet Plummer and Grundmann have integrated them in the meaning of the whole parable by an implicit *a fortiori* argument: if an unrighteous servant is commended for prudence in fraudulent use of his master's goods, how much more will a righteous one be commended by his heavenly master for providing for eternity by a good use of what has been committed to him? This solution is inadequate, for I find no hint of that argument in text or context, while the reversal of "unfair" is spread throughout the gospel of Lk and the immediate context.

⁴⁹Once again note the emphasis on giving to the poor is taken as a sharing of common life in Acts 2:44f. and 4:32-35.

others who will then be able to receive one (as God's agents) into the kingdom (Lk 16:9, 10-13);

3. When this whole unit on riches (16:1-31) was, in the final redaction, added to ch. 15, it completed a theological motif of forgiveness which is also distinctly Lucan. In this final polishing of the piece, the injustice of the steward becomes a key element of the parable, for the Christian is being asked to do something which appears "unjust" to human eyes, and even scandalous to the Pharisees (15:2). The forgiveness which occurs seven times a day (Lk 17:3) goes beyond reasonable expectation and so reveals a higher justice, that of the merciful Father (6:36). (This concept of a higher justice is a piece of Lucan theology, but also a part of the whole gospel tradition.) Being faithful to this kind of justice is what makes the Christian steward trustworthy with true wealth and an heir of the kingdom.

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