Integrity and Corruption in the Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-8): A Contextual Study

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Abstract

This essay is a study of the Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-8) in the context of Luke 16:9-15 and other Lucan parables and teachings on riches; in particular, Luke 12:1-8; 16:19-31; the beatitudes (Luke 6:24-26) and the Magnificat (Luke 1:53). The study grapples exegetically and contextually with identifying what constitutes corruption and integrity in the parable. This contextual and exegetical approach reveals that the longstanding paradoxical problem in this parable of the master praising the unjust manager (Luke 16:8b) gets its Lucan Gospel solution when "the rich man", "master" (kyrios), is dissociated from God and Jesus and situated in his covenanted community. The lack of integrity on the part of the master, steward and debtors stands in contrast to the integrity of the unnamed persons who drew the master's attention to the steward's reckless way of managing his estate; who in addition for pure self-interest exploited the equally integrity-lacking debtors. In contrast to the corruption of these trio, Jesus commends integrity to his disciples who have to make a radical option between serving God and serving mammon (Luke 16:15). The study ends by highlighting areas of the parable's relevance in the Nigerian and African Church and societal contexts.

Keywords: Parable, Contextual study, Stewardship, Integrity, Corruption, Riches.

0. Introduction

The parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-8) is one of the most controversial and most studied of Jesus' parables.[1] How is one to understand this parable, or grapple with the dilemma in which Jesus apparently praises one whom translators and critics variously call "the shrewd manager",[2] the "astute steward",[3] "a smart but corrupt minister",[4] and others "the crafty steward",[5] "the dishonest manager"[6] "the unjust steward"?[7] The study examines this parable in its broader gospel context of Luke 16:1-15 and within the context of Luke's teaching concerning riches in general; and in particular, Luke 12:16-21 (the rich fool) and Luke 16:19-31 (the rich man and Lazarus). Reading the parable in this broader context enables a possible contribution towards resolving the dilemma in Luke 16:1-8; or at least offers a different approach to this parable. Viewing the parable from the perspective of CABAN 2019 Conference theme of integrity and corruption can also shed light on some puzzling elements in it and sharpen its gospel message for today.

The study addresses the fundamental question whether the manager's action (vv. 3-7) is one of integrity, given the master's praise of this action in verse 8a and the comment which most interpreters attribute to Jesus in verses 8b-9. Or is his action to be considered as a corrupt action because of the dishonesty involved? What are the indices of honesty (integrity) and dishonesty (corruption) in the parable? What light does the rest of the episode (vv. 9-15) shed on this enigmatic parable and the

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[1] A Google search on this parable reveals over 2,850,000 entries on Luke 16:1-13, including videos, lectures on YouTube and images of the deals between the shrewd manager and the debtors; accessed 25 October 2019.

[2] The New Jerusalem Bible, loc cit.

[3] Cf. Justin S. Ukpong, *Gospel Parables in African Context* (Port Harcourt: Catholic Institute of West Africa, 1988); https://www.amazon.co.uk > Gospels.

[4] Chris Ukachukwu Manus, "The Smart but Corrupt Minister": A Social-Scientific Critical and the Reader-Response Analytical Study of Luke 16:1-9 (proposed paper topic for this Conference).

[5] Henry Wansbrough and Pierre Benoit editors, NJB; subtitle to Luke 16:1-8.

[6] Michael D. Coogan (chief ed.), *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), New Testament, 127–128; referenced as AOB in this work.

[7] Jeffrey W. Hamilton, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13)", in *Expository Files* 13.5, May 2006; http://www.bible.ca/; accessed 11 October 2019.

dilemma it poses as a teaching of Jesus? What can we learn from the Lucan attitude towards riches in the Gospel, especially in Luke 12:16-21 (which may be considered as a remote context of Luke 16:1-8) and Luke 16:19-31 (which immediately follows this parable) in our search to understand Jesus' advice to his disciples to "make friends" for themselves "by means of dishonest wealth (*mammon*)",[8] so that when the wealth is gone, these friends "may welcome them to eternal homes" (16:9)? Is "dishonest wealth", the true or theological rendering of this verse? The study offers first a word about the "gospel context", then an analysis of the parable itself in its Lucan gospel context. Finally it briefly situates the parable in today's context to highlight its contemporary relevance.

1. A Word about the Gospel Context

Current biblical studies tend to emphasise "delimitation of the text" in the selection of a passage for study. One needs to justify the reason for selecting the limits of such a text by presenting internal reasons for opting to limit the parameters of the text. Why, for instance, would one select for study John 2:1-11 (which ends with the significance Jesus' alpha sign), and not John 2:1-12 (which deals with the ecclesial significance or outcome of the disciples' belief in Jesus' alpha sign, namely, the formation of a community of believers or the faith-based family of Jesus which consists of Jesus, his mother and his disciples (v 12)?[9]

While interest in delimitation of text reigns in the scholarship, it needs to be remembered first, that the original recipients of the gospels and NT books generally would have heard it orally, not in writing; this was true not only of biblical works but of ancient literature and NT contemporary

[8] So the NRSV; the NJB has "money, that tainted thing".

[9] See on this Teresa Okure, "The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament: Implications for Women in Mission", *Journal of Inculturation Theology* (*JIT)* 2/2 (1995), 196-210; and her commentary "John", in William R. Farmer et al (eds.), *International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 1438-1505; republished by St Paul Publications India as *International Bible Commentary: An Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century.*

works.[10] The printing press is a modern invention. The recipients would have listened to Luke's Gospel, read perhaps from beginning to end, or at least in sections till the whole work, wherein lies the complete message, was heard. Secondly, the division of NT works into chapters and paragraphs do not exist in the original manuscripts of these works. Whatever response these observations attract, this work assumes their reality in reading the parable of the manager in the Luke's Gospel context.

This contextual reading would shed light on the possible interpretation of the action of the manager in Luke 16:1-8 and the extended comments and responses to it in verses 9-15. Beyond the surface reading of the parable, or rather beneath it lies the consistent theological teaching or the Lucan attitude towards wealth and riches; a teaching that serves as light for understanding the problematic text.

2. Analysis of Luke 16:1-9, 10-15

The parable of the shrewd manager (vv. 1-8a) opens this chapter (in the current arrangement of the Gospel with chapter breaks). Nothing leads to it: there is no question or provoking event as often happens in many of Jesus' parables.[11] Jesus initiates and tells the parable "to his disciples" (v. 1). Immediately preceding this parable is that of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), which Jesus tells in response to the criticism of the Scribes and Pharisees that "he welcomes tax collectors and eats with them" (Luke 15:1-2). The Prodigal son wasted not his master's goods, as does the manager, but his very inheritance, something which by law was inalienable.[12] Yet, despite having forfeited his inheritance, the son returned home to receive a hero's welcome from his humanly speaking

[10] See Teresa Okure, "First Was Orality, Not the Book: Challenges and Prospects of the Bible and Orality in Africa**",** commissioned paper given at International Conference on *The Bible and Orality in Africa*, Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), Nairobi, 14th - 15th September 2018; co-hosted by BICAM (Bible Commission for Africa and Madagascar), and the Institute of Missiology, Missio, Aachen; publication in progress.

[11] Examples: the parable of the Good Samaritan was sparked off by the question: "Who is my neighbour" (Luke 10:25-37); that of the rich fool by the request to Jesus to mediate on the sharing of family heritage (Luke 12:13-21).

[12] On the inalienable nature of inheritance, see Num 27:5-11; 36:1-9. This law probably inspired Naboth's refusal to give his "ancestral heritage" to Ahab (2 Kings 21:1-3).

wasteful prodigal father; to the humanly speaking justified resentment of his elder brother.[13] Immediately following the parable is another parable about a sumptuously rich man and a poverty-stricken Lazarus (vv 19-31) and the ultimate fate of each after death. Mixed comments and reactions connected with the parable are that of Jesus who tells the parable to his disciples (v. 8b) with his further teaching on the right use of money (v. 9), and on stewardship and accountability (vv. 10-13). Other voices are those of the money-loving Pharisees, who ridicule Jesus for his teaching on money (v. 14) and Jesus' rejoinder to their ridicule (v. 15). Though often omitted in the interpretation of the parable of the shrewd manager, the current study considers these verses 10-15 relevant for a fuller understanding the parable.

The parable may be analysed in the following units:

- The parable itself which ends with the master's praise of the manager's action (vv 1-8a); and Jesus' comment on that praise (v 8b);
- A lesson which the disciples must draw from the parable (v 9);
- Further comments of Jesus on the right use of money and stewardship/accountability (vv 10-13);
- The response of those standing by, the Pharisees, to Jesus' teaching on the love of money (v 14) and Jesus' rejoinder (v 15).

This entire chapter 16, including the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, focuses on wealth and its management, positively or negatively. As already indicated, Luke's audience would have heard, not read, the parable without chapter breaks. They would, at least, have heard continuity between this parable and that of the rich man and Lazarus in this one chapter. This parable warns against the danger and dehumanising, self-destroying nature of wealth or money/mammon as in other parts of the Gospel.[14] Its message is reinforced by Jesus' repeated

[13] See Teresa Okure, "Gospel and Faith in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15)", in Anthony Ewherido, Bernard Ukwegbu, Mary Jerome Obiorah, Joseph Haruna Mamman (eds.), *The Bible on Faith and Evangelisation,* Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), vol. 6 (Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications 2015), 169-195.

[14] In the parable of the rich fool already cited (12:16-21), Jesus' word on the difficulty of the rich to enter into God's kingdom was sparked off by the lawyer who rejected his invitation to follow him due to his having "great possessions" (Luke 18:18-25); in that of

exhortation to his disciples in the gospels not to worry about material things but to trust in God's assured providence for them (Luke 12:22-32). The Lucan beatitude sets the poor antithetically against the rich (Luke 6:24-26), in contrast to that of Matthew (5:3), Unlike Luke, Matthew has a qualifier for the poor: "poor in *spiri*t" (Matt 5:3). He says nothing about the rich while Luke bluntly declares: "woe to you who are rich" (Luke 6:24) and "who are full now" (6:24); a verse which recalls the Magnificat: "He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:53). These passages form the background to understanding Luke's stance concerning wealth and riches, in the parable under study.

2.1. The Parable (Vv. 1-8a)

There are two key characters in the parable: the master and the manager; and a group of minor characters, those who report the wastage to the master. The *master* is called "a rich man". This designation signals a red flag in the story, given Luke's consistent negative attitude to riches in the Gospel. How did this man become so rich that he could have others heavily indebted him or be so rich at the expense of his fellow covenanted citizens? Worse still, he seems to be unaware of the wastage of his property by his manager till others tell him about it.

In Jesus' lifetime, this parable is told within the context of the covenant community of Israel where the law or constitution prohibited them from exploiting or exacting "from a neighbour [a fellow Jew)] who is a member of the community" (Deut 15:3). Hence, "there shall be no poor among you" since YHWH would provide for all equally in the land given to all as their common "heritage" (Deut 15:2b-4).[15] Consequently, the only truly poor among them would be foreigners whom they, the covenanted community, would have to provide for, remembering that

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the Good Samaritan by the question of a lawyer: "Who is my neighbour" (Luke 10:29); and the celebrated triple parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and prodigal son in Luke 15 by the objection of the Pharisees to his welcoming tax collectors and sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:1-2).

[15] The whole of Deut 15:1-11 on the sabbatical year is a reminder to the covenant community not to exploit in any way their fellow citizens; but rather to be ready to reach out to those of them who may be in need wherever they may be.

they too were once foreigners in Egypt (Deut 15:11b); nevertheless, they could also exploit foreigners if they wanted (Deut 15:3a). In Luke's context, the audience would be post-resurrection disciples, who have learnt the value of sharing and holding all things in common such that none of their members would be in want (cf. Luke 2:42-47; 4:32-37).

People who are rich by honest means do not recklessly squander their wealth or remain indifferent to how their wealth is managed. Because they earned it the hard way, they know its value.[16] The impression here is that this master is on the spot all the time, in contrast to the king who distributed his gifts to servants and went on a long journey (cf. Luke19:12-26). The first irresponsibility or lack of integrity in the parable is, therefore, that of the rich man, the manager's master, who is unconcerned about his probably ill-gotten property and what happens to it.

The *manager* is the key character in the parable. He is a manager, not a steward, though commentators use the two terms interchangeably because the Greek *oikonomos* stands for both terms. The work of the steward is principally to distribute faithfully at the appropriate time what is entrusted to him or her to members of a household. The manager's work entails proactive wisdom in looking after the property of the master to ensure and promote its growth. In Luke 12:41, the "faithful steward", whom his master "puts in charge to give the household their measure of food in due time" is promoted to the status of manager "in charge of his possessions". The promotion is the reward of his success as steward (12:44). The parable of the pounds (Luke 19:12-27) or talents (Matt 25:14-30) elucidates what managing entails. Another elucidator is Joseph's managing activities in Egypt (Gen 41:37-49).

As entrusted manager, the task of the one in the parable is to safeguard and promote the growth of his master's property (or estate). By

[16] A billionaire in the US made his son work in his company so as to realise the value of money, though he knew the son was his sole inheritor. On one occasion the son came to apply for work after all available posts were taken. His dad told him he had to look for work elsewhere. This Dad's action got into the dailies. He told the journalists that he had worked hard for his wealth. But that though the son was his sole inheritor, he had to learn the value of money by earning it, otherwise he would squander the wealth he would inherit.

squandering instead of managing this property, he fails in his duty as manager. Others, who are concerned about his wasteful, reckless handling of his master's property, report him to the master. His managerial skills only come to the fore when his job as manager is threatened and he puts this skill superbly to his self-service.

Quickly and sharply he deliberates within himself on what to do. Reflecting within oneself in this kind of situation is a deviant action. We see this in case of the rich fool: "He thought to himself 'What will I do for I have no place to store my crops'" (Luke 12:17-18)? Consulting self on what to do for self with one's wealth differs from reflecting within oneself to understand what a deed of God or a saying of and about Jesus could mean.[17] This manager weighs within himself two honest options, options of integrity, and rejects both: to work in the farm he is unable (because perhaps he has never done so since his seems to be a white-collar job); and to beg he is too ashamed. Yet in his community era, farming, the first option, was the most common means of earning one's livelihood. "You shall eat of the fruit of the labour of your hands" (Psa 128:3). The primary job God gave to humanity (*adam*) was "to till and keep" the garden which God had freely planted for them (Gen 2:15). The multiple references to farming, vineyards and cornfields in the gospels testify that agriculture (tilling the soil) was the primary occupation in this period. His other option is to beg; of that he is ashamed.

The two options ruled out, the manager resorts to enlisting others into the dishonest way he has figured out for providing for himself when he loses his job. "I have decided on what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes" (v. 4). Unlike the rich fool who tells us what he will do (pull down his barns and erect a bigger one, Luke 12:3), the manager does not say what he will do. He goes straight into an action that he considers as honourable option, though it is a corruptly disguised way of stealing from his master and exploiting his master's debtors. In effect, he converts the people's debt to his master unto lasting debt to himself: "so that people may welcome me into their homes". The "welcome" will be their lasting act of gratitude to

[17] Some Lucan examples are Mary at the Annunciation (Luke 1:29), at the visit of the shepherds after the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:15), and at the finding of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2: 51).

him for his reduction of their debts to the master. The prodigal father (Luke 15) rated his wasteful son above wealth. The manager rates his personal needs above the good of the master and his debtors.

The parable ends with the master's commendation of the manager for his astuteness (v. 8a). Though the main character in the parable is the dishonest manager; it is the master's praise of his astuteness or dishonesty that makes the parable popularly problematic. Few examples of the meaning given to the manager's action and his master's response are worth reviewing:[18]

> The meaning of the story for those hearing Jesus' teaching is that the dishonest manager was prudent in using the things of this life to ensure the future, so believers should do the same. More generally, however, the probable sense of the story itself is that the steward (manager) was dishonest in his squandering of the master's estate. When confronted, he does not necessarily engage in dishonest behaviour (in fact he is praised for his actions), but he calls in the debtors and reduces their bills by eliminating his own commission. Thus, he shrewdly uses material goods to win gratitude from his master's debtors.[19]

Interestingly, the above-cited ecumenical study version of the Bible brings in the issue of the commission due to the manager not found in the story. In other words, what the manager cancelled were the debts owed to him personally; he was not cheating the master. This interpretation does not address the core of the manager's question to the debtors: "How much do you owe my master"? The fact that he summons them "one by one" to prevent a group awareness of his action; and the speed with which each transaction is made: "Take your bill ["bond" in some translations'], sit down quickly and make it fifty" (v. 6; cf. v. 7), give the impression that he is into a shady deal.[20]

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[18] Some scholars describe the manager as astute; this has a positive meaning. Others see him as a dishonest person, someone corrupt, lacking in integrity.

[19] See note 6 above.

[20] A Google search for Luke 16:1-13 yields 1, 850,000 results; see www.bible.ca/ef/expository-luke%2016-1-13.htm; https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+16:1-13&version=ESV; https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+16:1-13&version=NRSV;

Nevertheless, this interpretation by the AOB highlights the dilemma caused by the master's praise of the manager in verse 8a, when one starts with the premise that the master is Jesus: "His master Lord/is reference to Jesus (perhaps indicating a reference to Jesus as 'the Lord') rather than being the words of Jesus' conclusion to the parable".[21]

Another interpretation takes a contrary view:

> It ["the parable of the unjust steward"] has puzzled many people through the ages. How is it that an unfaithful steward, about to be relieved of his position, gains praise from his employer when he ends his career by stealing more from him?[22]

The author sees the parable as one among many in which "Jesus tells about an unrighteous person to illustrate a point about righteousness".[23] He interprets the parable in a loose global context, about how we are to use and manage things in creation that God has given to us as aid to entering eternal life. In his view "the friends of whom Jesus is speaking are not worldly friends, but spiritual friends for they are waiting to receive us into an everlasting home"; and cites 1 Tim 6:17-19 and John 15:13 as scriptural support for his interpretation.[24]

His conclusion:

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https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+16:1-13; www.bible.ca/ef/expository-luke 16-1-13.htm→; a fascinating a gallery of pictures of the deal between the manager and the debtors are worth visiting as they interpret/project the manager's action as shady deal between him and the debtors. In most of them, the manager is fat, stocky and dressed exotically (like our Nigerian senators or members of house of Representatives), while the debtors are thin and shabbily dressed by comparison. See Vmeo>/SL?KJV Bible and bing.com/videos on "A Good Lesson from a Bad Example (Luke 50.04 16:1-13"; all websites accessed on 20/10/19.

[21] See note 18 above.

[22] Hamilton, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward" (note 3 above), 1.

[23] Hamilton, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward" (note 3 above), 1.

[24] Hamilton, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward" (note 3 above), 5; the next quotation is also from this page.

> Being forewarned that he is about to lose his job, the unjust steward brilliantly provides for himself by making use of his lord's resources. But note carefully that the lord doesn't commend the mismanagement of his possessions. "So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly" (Luke 16:8). Jesus is not praising his unrighteous actions. The admiration is for the brilliant planning.

As seen from these two examples, the basic and lingering problem in this verse lies in identifying Jesus as the master (*kyrios*). This identification is untenable on three grounds: Firstly, Jesus is the one telling the parable, so he cannot suddenly refer to himself at the end of it as the master (*kyrios*). Jesus' consistent self designation in the gospels is *ho hyios tou anthrōpou* ("the son of a human being"; or quite simple "the human being"). Secondly, the word "master" (*kyrios*) in verses 3 and 5 clearly refer to the rich man whose property the manager wastes and whom the debtors owe.[25] This is "the master" who praises the servant for his astuteness (v. 8a), not Jesus. Thirdly, God and Jesus are never referred to as "a rich man" in the gospels or Scriptures generally. To be rich is to acquire wealth by some means or by birth or inheritance. God the creator who owns the entire creation cannot be regarded as acquiring wealth. Romans 11:33-36, among other texts, testifies to this: "Oh the depths of the riches and of the wisdom and knowledge of God. . . All things are from him, though him and to him". What creatures can do is render him praise and "the glory forever" (v. 33).

The consistent negative attitude towards riches in Luke and the NT, generally, rule out the possibility of God or Jesus being viewed as a man. We see this negative view in the parable the rich man and Lazarus in this very chapter. Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) "a chief tax collector" who "was rich" (v. 2) made fourfold restitution to those he might have cheated and then shared evenly with the poor what was properly his own possession (v. 8). By so doing, he proved that he was a true son of Abraham, a member of the covenant community (v. 9-10).

[25] The entries are "my master" (subject case, v. 3); "debtors of his master" (genitive case) and "How much do you owe my master" (dative case) both in verse 5.

Once this clarification is made that the master in the parable is not Jesus, the master's commendation of the manager in verse 8a takes on a new meaning. By praising the manager, the master demonstrates his admiration of the shrewdness or craftiness of his manager. This action, perhaps, recalls and surpasses how he himself became rich in the first instance. Verse 8b, which is still part of the parable, can then be viewed as Jesus' proverbial comment on the master's praise of the dishonest manager and the combined actions of the master, the manager and the debtors who allow themselves to be robbed into cheating the master, thinking they were benefitting from it. Jesus characteristically ends his parables with comments that invite the audience to refection in view of appropriating or internalising the message of the parable.[26] This case is no exception.

All three characters in the parable are "children of this age [who] are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light".[27] They know how to deal smartly with one another and among themselves, using their own corrupt measures that operate in the darkness. The children of light seem not to use their own resources to achieve actions of integrity. In John's Gospel, Jesus, the Light of the world (John 8:12), tells Nicodemus that those "whose deeds are evil prefer darkness to light" for fear their evil deeds would be exposed. But "those who do what is true come to the light so it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (John 3:20-21). The children of the light here are children of God who do deeds of righteousness or integrity (cf. Luke 8:16; 11:33; 14:34-35).

The wicked usually practise solidarity among themselves for their common cause. In this parabolic instance, there is no common cause. Those whose bonds the manager cancels apparently know not his ulterior motive. As debtors, they are already in need; their inability to pay testifies to this. In their need, they thought the manager was doing them a

[26] Examples at the end of the parable of the Sower: "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (Luke 8:8); and in the parable of the Good Samaritan: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37), etc.

[27] The AOB (note 6 above) sees "the children of light" as "those who are spiritually enlightened (cf. John 12.36, Eph 5.8; 1 Thess 5.5); and in the Dead Sea Scrolls where it is contrasted with the phrase 'children of darkness'".

favour by reducing their debts, not knowing he was making them perpetually indebted to him. Or are the people who owed the master but refused to pay? The speed with which they respond to the manager's underhand dealing implies that they are not totally innocent of the nature of the deal of which they are willing partners.

We have here the case of tampering with records. The manager and the two debtors showcased (the text implies that there are others) are partners in crime to defraud the master. He himself would already have defrauded the covenant community. The irony is that the debtors are unaware of the ulterior motive of the manager: his using them for his own purpose. Under the guise of relieving them of their debt, he makes them perpetually indebted to him.

In sum, the action of the manager is dishonest, corrupt or lacking in integrity in his dealings with the master and the debtors. A common definition of corruption is the use of public office to promote self or private interests. This could be personal interest or that of one's group. The manager uses his office to promote his private personal interest over that of the master and debtors. He is also corrupt in his laziness or refusal to work to earn a living. Though in reality he is a beggar, he pretends to be a benefactor of those he is cheating. The master and debtors are equally corrupt in their different ways.

Not to be forgotten in the parable are *the minor characters,* who report the manager's wastage of his property to the master. Though the least significant, they are perhaps the most important in the parable. Without them, there would be no parable such as is recorded here. They are the only characters with integrity in the story. They notice the wasteful action of the manager and report it to the master. Though usually unrecognized and unnamed, little, insignificant people often play key roles in the Scriptures.[28]

[28] Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam 11:1-12:15) comes readily to mind. Without his refusal to succumb to David's pressure against military ethics, there would have been no story; the same with Naboth and his refusal to alienate his inheritance (2 Kings 21:1-3), to name but a few.

2.2. Lessons from the Parable (Vv. 9-13)

The solemn saying in verse 9 attributed to Jesus is problematic. Is he advising his disciples to embezzle money or acquire it by unjust means (*mamona tēs adikias*), and then use it to gain entry into eternal dwellings after the example of "the unjust manager" (*oikonomos tēs adikias*, v. 8b) who cheated his master by reducing the debt of his debtors to ensure their welcoming him into their homes when he loses his job? Can "*mamona tēs adikias*" have meaning other than "mammon/money acquired through iniquitous and unrighteous acts" as is often understood and interpreted? Do the common translations "mammon of iniquity" and "mammon of unrighteousness" do justice to this phrase?

To address this issue we put the saying, attributed to Jesus, in Luke's theological context. "That riches are a danger and should be given away in alms is a characteristic teaching of Luke".[29] This is NJB's comment on Jesus' teaching on the need to sell one's possessions and give to those in need so as to have one's treasure in heaven. Alongside trust in God's providence (12:22-32), it is a lesson to be drawn from the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21). References to this characteristic teaching in Luke are many.[30] Apart from these specific references, Luke's teaching on riches permeates his Gospel, the NT and the OT prophetic and wisdom literature generally. James, for instance, joins Luke in declaring "woe" to those who are rich (Luke 6:24) by asking them to "weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you" (Jam 5:1).

In addition to this theological teaching, or perhaps because of it, *mamona tēs adikias* would signify that money or wealth of itself or by nature is incapable of making one just. It is *a-dikias*, lacking in righteousness (compare *a-theist*; unbeliever in God). The Greek *adikias* would then refer to the nature/intrinsic worth of money, just as it defines the character of the manager in "*oikonomos tēs adikias*". One may compare this to the unjust judge (*ho kritēs tēs adikias,* cf. Luke 18:1-8; v 6) who

[29] Wansborough and Benoit, and NJB, note d of Luke 12:33-34.

[30] See, for instance, 3:11; 6:30; 7:5; 11:14-15, 41; 12:33-34; 16:9; 18:22; 9:8; Acts 9:36; 10:2, 4, 31; all references given in the NJB in note d to 12:33-34. These concrete references do not exhaust Luke's teaching on the subject of riches which permeates his Gospel, the NT generally and the prophetic and wisdom literature.

fears neither God nor human beings.[31] The NJB translation of *mamonas tēs adikias* (vv. 9, 12) as "money that tainted thing" captures the meaning here. The alternative reading, *adikou mamona* of the Latin codices,[32] makes "unjust" or "unrighteous" qualify money/*mammon* itself, rather than the means by which it is acquired.

Verse 11 corroborates this interpretation: "If then you have not been faithful with *dishonest wealth*, who will entrust you with true riches?" (NRSV).[33] If *adikōu mamona* here were to signify "wealth acquired by dishonest means", how would one be expected to "be faithful" in its administration? The consistent translation by the NJB, "money, that tainted thing" of these verses suits this context. The point is that money in itself is not true riches; it is incapable of making one righteous or justifying one. We recall Luke 12:33-35, where Jesus counsels his disciples to give their riches to the poor so as to have true riches in heaven.

The ensuing parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31) further illustrates Jesus' counsel to his disciples in 16:9 to use material means to make friends, who would welcome them into eternal dwellings. As noted earlier, the rich master in the parable is to be situated in the context of Israel's covenant community. This context is borne out in this parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man dressed royally in purple, dining sumptuously each day, neglects the poverty-stricken Lazarus, a member of the community, lying at his very gate. Lazarus dies and is taken to the bosom of Abraham, the Proto-ancestor of Israel. The rich, man dies and is buried. Now in Hades, he appeals to Abraham to send Lazarus, whom he had neglected in life, to his aid. Abraham refers him back to the teachings of the Law (their covenant code) and the prophets (the guardians of that covenant). If he and his brothers still alive paid little or no attention to their teaching, it would be useless to think that they would believe one who "rises from the dead" (Luke 16:29-31), since such a one would have no new message that would move them to conversion. The rich man ignored his community obligations while alive; he became

[31] See the article of Cosmas Uzowulu, "Corrupt but Repented Judge—A Study of Luke 19:1-8: Implications for Contemporary Society" in this volume.
[32] The Latin Codices D and A, both fourth century.
[33] Italics added for emphasis.

aware only when he got to Hades. The parable makes no direct comment about the wealth of the rich man or how he acquired it. The point of the story is his gross neglect of Lazarus. Wealth blinds and makes one insensitive instead of making one righteous.

From the contextual and theological evidence above, it cannot be said that in verse 9, Jesus is advising his disciples to use unjust means to acquire money or to use money thus acquired to make friends, who would welcome them to heaven. Zacchaeus, again, comes to mind. He first made a fourfold restitution of money he might have acquired by unjustly overtaxing people and keeping the surplus to enrich himself and shared equally ("half") of what was his own with the poor. In that way, he proved he was a true son of Abraham and a beneficiary of the salvation Jesus brought. What welcomes or restores Zacchaeus into Abraham's fold is not his money as such, but his repentance from exploiting others and sharing his wealth with the poor, making friends with them. The story of Zacchaeus is a true story, not a parable like that of the shrewd manager.

2.3. Jesus' further comment on the parable (vv 10-13)

In verses 10-13, Jesus continues to help the disciples to understand the full lesson of the parable of the shrewd manager. Whoever is faithful in little things, will be faithful in great. Whoever is dishonest in little things, will be dishonest in great. Faithfulness and integrity in the administration of material things such as money qualifies one to be a trusted minister of spiritual things which have a much greater value. Whatever misgivings one may have on the Lucan Jesus' stance with regard to the use of material things is laid to rest by his categorical saying: "No one can serve two masters". One either loves God and allows that love to regulate one's use and administration of material things; or one hates God and loves material things and becomes enslaved by them. "You cannot serve God and mammon/wealth" (v. 13b). God and mammon are two economies in conflict.[34]

[34] "God and Mammon: Economies in Conflict" was a theme of the quadrennial Conference of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS); for an image

2.4. Response by Pharisees and Jesus' rejoinder (vv 14-15)

These verses are not seen as belonging to the parable, because the respondents are not the disciples to whom the parable (vv 1-8) and Jesus' teaching based on it (vv 9-13) are addressed. The Pharisees, who hear Jesus' teaching on the love of money, probably heard the entire parable of the astute manager. Described as "those standing by" (16:14), they seem to be present from the time they were mentioned in Luke 15:1 as the direct addressees of the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and prodigal son. Whatever the case, they demonstrate how blinding to the truth the love of money can be. As those "who love money", they ridicule Jesus for his teaching that one cannot serve two masters, or combine love and service of God with love and service of money; one has to choose between God and mammon. Their attitude evokes the corruption on the part of the shrewd manager. He loved money more than his service to his master or his duty to the master's debtors.

The Pharisees, religious leaders, equally lack integrity in their love of money and in their hypocrisy by justifying themselves before people (the theme of just, justifying and righteousness persists even here),[35] and making others praise them (as the shrewd manager did with the debtors) though God knows their heart, as God knew (understood) the heart of the manager. Jesus makes them aware that God considers their self exaltation to gain false praise as an abomination, even as God would consider as abomination the activities of the master, the manager and the debtors in the parable of the shrewd manager. Their love of money and hypocrisy counts as corrupt action.

3. The Parable in Contemporary Context

The situation in the parable of the shrewd manager evokes, in many respects, what happens in today's world globally, concerning the multiple ways in which corruption is practised. A few examples will

depicting the total dichotomy entailed see "God and mammon.png" (accessed 25/10/2019.

[35] The Pharisees are those who justify themselves, *hoi dikaiountes heautous*, before people. This recalls the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14) and Jesus' woes to the Pharisees (Matt 24:13-36) after warning his disciples against their hypocrisy (Matt 23:1-8).

suffice. In Nigeria, some politicians and civil servants embezzle public funds and from them pay fat tithes and make huge donations to the Church and are praised for it. In their fight against corruption, the Kenyan Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) noted this and committed themselves to reject huge donations made to the Church through the looting of the national treasury.[36] Yet people praise or excuse such actions, believing that through them the donors "make friends" for themselves with "dishonest mammon" so that when this corrupt wealth fails, or when they die, their donations will gain them entrance into heaven. Often Luke 16:8b-9 is cited as scriptural justification of the practice. From the outcome of this study, to use these verses in this manner is itself to corrupt the meaning of Jesus' teaching.

In many places, not only in Nigeria, the cancellation of the bond might take the form of destroying the evidence, such as setting on fire the office or building where the records are kept so that the magnitude of the embezzlement and corrupt deals might not be found. In the relation of the West to the developing nations, corruption includes the duplicity of cheating the developing countries: carting out their enormous wealth and rich natural resources and giving them a pittance from this loot by way of aid or worst still as loans. A video circulating on WhatsApp has a group of Whites huddling together (as the manager and the debtors are projected in the Internet videos) laughing; with the caption: "We steal 100% of their resources, give them 1% of the benefit and call it foreign aid". These practices keep the receiver nations perpetually poor and perpetually indebted to the donor nations. Over the years, these foreign aids have become like HIIV/AIDS to these developing nations, especially in Africa,[37] while these nations continue to see their donors as their benefactors. The pittance given can take the form of technical advice on various projects of the developing nations, calculated to keep them perpetually underdeveloped and dependent on the West.

[36] On the action-based fight of the Kenyan Conference of Catholic Bishops starting from within the Church and their commitments to eradicate it, see the "President's Address and Elaboration of the Conference Theme" in this volume.

[37] On this metaphor see the "President's Welcome Address and Elaboration of the Conference Theme" in this volume.

Politicians in most developing countries recklessly share the wealth of the nation among them and give a pittance to the people by way of "projects" in their communities. These projects are often calculated to further buy the people's votes in the next election. Like the debtors in the parable, the people are ignorant of the true motive of the politicians and of the fact that the nation's wealth belongs to them. They receive with gratitude these crumbs that fall from the tables of these corrupt politicians. They praise them on the media for their great generosity and celebrate them as their benefactors for the crumbs given to them from the national loot, from what rightly belongs to them.

"To dig I am unable". When Nigeria discovered oil, the nation stopped tilling the soil, dropped the rich resources that came from agriculture (groundnuts, palm oil and the mining of other minerals like coal in Enugu and tin in Jos), which it exported. It made the oil its one and only source of national revenue. Politics, not agriculture or working on the farm, became and continues to be the most sought-after employment in the nation. In this way, corruption and reckless embezzlement set in. Politicians exploit the newfound wealth to their self-dehumanisation and the impoverishment of the masses. They give themselves fat salaries and bonus monies from the oil money while they debate endlessly on the minimum wage of the people; the amount of which is less than what they themselves receive as bonus over and above their regular salaries.

In general, many people think working, especially on the farm, is mean job. Most of those who get white collar jobs often do not work in the offices and in public institutions; yet they expect fat salaries. Some in the medical and teaching profession redirect clients from government institutions that employ them to their own private medical centres or remedial educational institutions where they give better services than they do in their places of employment (to maintain the clients). Exploitation of students for grades is common place; so too denying workers their just wages in both public and private institutions. In most cases, only about a quarter of monies budgeted for projects are actually spent on the project because the senators, the middlemen and the contractors all get their percentage of the budgeted amount, leaving a pittance for the actual project.

The talk about fighting corruption often enhances or conceals the promotion of corruption. Blatantly corrupt politicians quickly change from a defeated party to a victorious one in order not to be probed for embezzlement by the victorious party. The new party welcomes them with open arms. The Nigerian Vice President of the APC party, Yemi Osinbajo (speaking for the party) is reported in the social media as having said that whoever leaves the PDP to join APC "has become a new creature". This is a corrupt interpretation and application of 2 Cor 5:17. In this ideology, the corrupt politicians, who switch party automatically, obtain the cancellation of their debt to the nation. They are assured that they will not be probed and will not be made to refund the money they looted, to the further impoverishment of the nation. They make provision for themselves at great cost to the nation just as the smart manager did to his master and the debtors. These deceitful actions and similar ones by the politicians and those in the private sector, though highly praised by humans, are an abomination in God's sight.

4. Conclusion

The study of integrity and corruption in the parable of the shrewd manager has revealed that corruption exists in the parable on the level of the master, his manager and the debtors who secretly allow the manager to tamper with their bonds and enter there a less amount than they actually owe the master. The most corrupt person in the parable is the manager who uses his entrusted office to defraud both the master and the debtors. Only those who reported to the master the manager's wastage of property are persons of integrity in the parable. Without them, there would be no parable as we have it in the Gospel. The Pharisees, described as lovers of money, who hear this parable or at least Jesus' teaching that double standard is displeasing to God belong to this corrupt group.

The Lucan Jesus tells this parable and the consequent teaching to his disciples to inculcate in them the spirit of integrity in their attitude towards money and its use. Money is to be used, not loved or served. Of itself, it cannot make one righteous and is useless beyond death. The Pharisees' response to the parabolic teaching demonstrates that even orthodox religious persons love money and practice corruption by

making people think they are holier than they actually are. Reading the parable of the shrewd manager in the wider context of Luke's Gospel sheds light on the problematic issues in the parable.

Many other examples could be drawn from this parable for our contemporary context globally. The insight from this study of the parable of the smart manager is that the parable in no way supports or endorses the practice by which people embezzle money in Church and society and yet donate such stolen money to the church, believing that God will bless them. Often the ordinary and insignificant people see through these evil practices both in Church and society (in politics, in private business and in educational institutions). Unlike the little people in the parable, they unfortunately often lack the means to make their complaints heard. Yet God, who sees the heart, approves of their stance of integrity. Ultimately what counts is this stance on integrity which these people share with Jesus, who tells the parable, and Luke, who narrates it in his Gospel. Recognized or not, they remain the children of light. Their presence prevents corruption from enveloping society to make it utter darkness. The parable challenges each reader to review his or her stance on the issue of integrity and corruption as a way of life.