### Join me in exploring Luke 16:1-­‐13 (“The Unrighteous Steward”) by studying the passage within its biblical context (the Gospel of Luke) as we analyze the structure and content, and end with a personal application.

**Section 1. The Broader Context of the Gospel of Luke.**

Although the author’s name is not mentioned in the book, it is generally accepted that Luke is the author. The Book of Acts was written by Luke, and there is evidence that both books were written by the same person. Paul's reference to "dear friend Luke, the doctor" (Colossians 4:14) and "fellow worker" (Philemon 24) are used to identify the author as Luke. It is believed that Luke was a Gentile who was well educated in Greek culture.

Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were addressed to the same individual, Theophilus. The use of greeting “most excellent” seems to indicate that this was written to an individual rather than a group (although it would have likely been distributed to others as well).

The purpose of the book seems to be strengthening the faith of the believers, embracing the Gentile Christians, and dispelling verbal attacks from unbelievers. The book covers the life and times of Jesus: Birth/preparation for ministry (1:1-4:13), ministry in Galilee (4:14-9:9), withdrawal (9:10-50), ministry in Judea (9:51-13:21), ministry around Perea (13:22-19:27), and Jesus’ Last Days (19:28-24:53). There are two key passages within the Gospel of Luke – 9:23-25 (“…deny himself and take up his cross daily…”), and 19:9-10 (“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost”). (NIV references)

The Gospel of Luke is considered to be one of the four Gospels, therefore the genre of the book is GOSPEL; however, in this passage Luke is recounting Jesus’ parable about “The Unrighteous Steward” (heading from NASB); therefore, the Immediate Genre is Narrative/Parable.

**Section 2. Relationship within Luke’s “Travel Narrative of Jesus” (Luke 9:51-­‐19:28).**

The last six months of Jesus’ ministry takes place along a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem as Luke documents it in this passage. Along the way, he ministers in Judea (9:51-13:21) and Perea (13:22-19:27). It’s worth noting that at the beginning of our passage (16:1), Luke mentions that Jesus was talking to his disciples; however, in the verse immediately following our passage (16:14), Luke says that there were Pharisees who were listening to this parable and scoffing. It is unclear whether the Pharisees were part of the audience, merely passing by, or whether that verse starts a new “episode” in the journey.

Luke recounts several of Jesus’ narratives and parables during these travels. Six parables/narratives recounted in Luke’s “Travel Narrative of Jesus” have to do with money or wealth: The Lost Coin (15:8-10), The Unrighteous Steward (16:1-18), The Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), The Rich Young Ruler (18:18-30), Zacchaeus the Tax-gatherer (19:1-10), and the Parable of the Money (19:11-27).

Each of these parables is unique, but the common thread is that we must not idolize money. In the Unrighteous Steward, we see an inept manager who squanders the master’s assets then acts dishonestly in an attempt to make a future for himself (so that he doesn’t have to dig ditches or beg in order to provide for his family).

In the parable of the Lost Coin, we see a similar situation to the Unrighteous Steward in that the “rich” master was concerned for the wealth that was lost due to the ineptness of the steward. Although the woman had nine other silver coins, she diligently looked for the one that was lost. Perhaps her situation was different than the “rich” master as she truly rejoiced when it was found. In contrast to the Unrighteous Steward parable, Jesus makes reference to the joy in Heaven when one sinner repents.

In the Rich Man and Lazarus, the rich man thoroughly enjoyed the finer things in life. Lazarus was poor and covered with sores. They both died – Lazarus was taken up to Heaven, and the rich man found himself in Hades. Tormented, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to bring him a cup of water. When that request was denied, he requests that Lazarus be sent to warn his family. The second request was also denied. The rich man was told, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead” (a foretelling of things to come – Jesus rising from the dead and many not persuaded). Similar to our passage, the point is having an eternal view of your possessions (e.g., helping others here on earth).

The Rich Young Ruler said that he’d kept the Ten Commandments since he was a youth. Jesus told him to “sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” Unfortunately, his love for money was greater than his desire to follow Jesus. As noted before, the rich young ruler didn’t have an eternal perspective on his possessions.

Zacchaeus the Tax-gather (a chief tax collector who was rich) gladly received Jesus. Zacchaeus told Jesus that he would give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back four times anyone he defrauded. Jesus said that salvation came to Zacchaeus’ house that day. When comparing to the Unrighteous Steward, we see that Zacchaeus had a much better perspective on wealth than did the steward or his master. [Note that Luke 19:10 is a key verse].

In the Parable of the Money, we see a similar situation to the Unrighteous Steward in that the “worthless slave” could have easily put the money in the bank and earned interest. At face value, this sounds like the slave was inept. However, the slave explains that he hid the money because he didn’t like the idea of the master gaining from work the slave had done. Perhaps this was part of the steward’s ineptness (not motivated to do a good job because the master rather than the steward would profit).

Each of these tells in its own way how we should view wealth and money. All have either a direct or indirect Heavenly perspective on wealth. It seems fitting that in these last few months of Jesus’ ministry on Earth that he should focus on money. There are many references throughout the Bible on the subject, and he is taking this last opportunity to discuss with his Disciples and those within ear-shot. The Unrighteous Steward is, in my opinion, a more complex narrative as there are several people involved – the steward, master, debtors, steward’s family (indirectly), and the audience (disciples). The Pharisees might have also been part of the audience (unless we believe that verse switches to a new locale).

**Section 3. The Outline of our passage, Luke 16:1-­‐13 (“The Unrighteous Steward”).** My more “enlightened” view of the passage after having studied it is: “Jesus wants believers to take heed and be shrewd in their business transactions; however, they should continue to serve God and not idolize money.”

Outline of “The Unrighteous Steward”

1. Introduction (vs1).
2. Rich man (aka master) heard a report about the manager (aka steward) (vs1).
3. Master confronted the steward (vs2).
4. Master asked for an accounting and then fired the steward (vs2).
5. Steward was upset and devised a plan for his future (vs3-4).
6. Steward implemented his plan – asking the debtors to meet with him and discounting their bills (vs5-7).
7. The master calls the steward “unrighteous” (or “dishonest”) but praises him for being shrewd (vs8).
8. Jesus teaches about handling money within a fallen world (faithful in little/much; cannot serve
 two masters – God and wealth) (vs8-13).

# **Section 4. The Exposition of our passage, Luke 16:1-­‐13 (“The Unrighteous Steward”).**

# Luke relays Jesus’ parable about “The Unrighteous Steward” and includes a narrative of related teachings about money. From the parable, we see that the steward acted badly from the beginning (mismanaging the master’s assets) and responded to his firing with unrighteous deeds (reduction of the bills after he was caught). Following the parable is a narrative with additional teachings about handling money (being faithful in little/much; cannot serve two masters – God and wealth).

Our passage falls into the Ministry around Perea timeframe where Luke recounts several of Jesus’ narratives and parables. This passage contains one of the 28 parables included in the book. Many of the parables recounted in Luke have to do with money (e.g., the lost coin, rich man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the rich young ruler).

# The characters in this parable are the master (aka “rich man”), the steward (aka “manager’), those who reported the manager’s squandering (“whistle blower(s)”), each of the master’s debtors (oil and wheat), and the Pharisees (in the verses immediately following this passage). Here is my analysis following the outline:

A. Introduction (vs1). Luke says that Jesus was talking with His disciples. From the previous chapters, we know that they were traveling from Galilee on their way to Jerusalem. In this passage, they would be in the vicinity of Perea. We are not told whether they were at a home, synagogue, sitting in a field, or walking along the road.

B. Rich man (aka master) heard a report about the manager (aka steward) (vs1). The master had a business that was run by the steward. Someone either publicly or anonymously told the master that the steward was squandering his possessions. We do not know the nature of the squandering, to what extent these actions were affecting the business, or how much money it was costing the master. Also, we do not know whether the steward was purposefully being dishonest or inept in his managing the business.

C. Master confronted the steward (vs2). The master called the steward and asked, “What is this I hear about you?” There is no information whether they worked in the same building, or perhaps the master made a surprise visit to the steward’s office. Additionally, there is no information whether the master allowed the steward to respond to his question or even if the steward had offered a defense.

D. Master asked for an accounting and then fired the steward (vs2). It is unclear what type of accounting report was expected, but I believe it is safe to assume that it would include something similar to a modern day balance statement and checkbook register (these would show the assets on hand as well as the income/expenses for the business). We are not sure how much time elapsed between the request for an accounting, receipt of the accounting report, and the firing. And at this point, we aren’t sure whether he was fired or demoted (“you can no longer be manager”). Taking it at face value, it could have happened all in the same day (you’re fired/demoted, but don’t leave without making sure the accounting is complete).

E. Steward was upset and devised a plan for his future (vs3-4). Given the level of concern for his livelihood, I believe that the steward was fired rather than demoted. He seems truly upset by what has transpired, but more focused on how he will survive rather than the reason for his being fired. He lists two employment options – digging and begging. Perhaps he didn’t think there would be others because of the shame of being fired (maybe nobody would hire him)? He devises a plan that will facilitate people welcoming him into their homes “when [he is] removed from the management” (this statement could imply that the firing didn’t take place right away).

F. Steward implemented his plan – asking the debtors to meet with him and discounting their bills (vs5-7). So here is his plan – he brings in all of the master’s debtors and reduces their bills (suspect this is part of the “accounting”). Only two debtors were listed – perhaps there were more discussed, but these were the two representative debtors that Luke recorded? Why did the steward ask the debtors to change their own bills? Why were there different discounts – was it reducing a price mark-up, reducing excessive interest, or eliminating his commission? And how much did these quantities of oil and wheat cost. All of these issues need further study.

G. The master calls the steward “unrighteous” (or “dishonest”) but praises him for being shrewd (vs8). Earlier in the passage, the steward is accused of “squandering” the master’s assets. That could mean he was dishonest or inept. But this is the first time that the steward was accused of being “unrighteous” (or “dishonest”). It appears to me that these are two separate events, and that the “praise” deals with the steward’s plan for the future (discounting the master’s bills).

H. Jesus teaches about handling money within a fallen world (faithful in little/much; cannot serve two masters – God and wealth) (vs8-13). Luke recounts Jesus’ narrative with additional teachings. Believers (“sons of light”) are not as shrewd as non-believers (“sons of this age”). We are encouraged to “make friends” using the wealth of the unrighteous. It’s implied that that type of wealth will fail, but the “friends” will receive you into the “eternal dwellings” (more study needed). Being faithful/unrighteous in little/much is a commonly quoted verse and often used in relation to business. No one can serve two masters is another commonly quoted verse (you cannot serve God and wealth).

The following were additional observations of the passage.

Literary:

* + Contrast – the actions of the master, manager, and debtors. The master heard a report and fired the manager (no information whether the manager was given the opportunity to explain himself). The manager was concerned with supporting himself/family in light of being fired, so he devised a plan that would put him in the good graces of the debtors. The debtors went along with the manager’s scheme – undoubtedly they knew that they were benefitting from the manager’s dilemma.
* Climax – when the master praised the manager for being shrewd. But wait – wasn’t the manager the bad guy in this parable? How can he be praised? This was totally unexpected and has caused much discussion and debate (see next section).
* Cruciality – when the manager summoned each of the debtors. This was his response to being caught and told he was fired.
* Illustration – Jesus illustrated a truth with this parable – that as believers, we must be shrewd with our business dealings yet not idolizing money/wealth.

Grammatical: these phrases struck me as being interesting and worth further study.

* “was reported to him” – was this an anonymous tip or word from a trusted employee/friend?
* “squandering his possessions” – was he inept or dishonest? Either way, there appeared to be no opportunity to defend himself. So suspect he was guilty so really he had no defense to offer.
* “Give an accounting of your management” – suspect it was a wrapping up of the work he had been doing (handing off to next manager).
* “you can no longer be manager” – suspect it was firing rather than simply demoting since he was worried about how he would earn a living.
* “he summoned each one” – why didn’t he go to them? Perhaps under a time crunch (“same day” clue?).

Historical: The parable was told as Jesus and His disciples were traveling. Perhaps they were more mindful of money, shelter, and business transactions as they traveled?

Cultural:

* “people will welcome me into their homes” – did this mean social (meal) or a place to live (long-term)?
* “wealth of unrighteousness” – what reactions would have been expected in those days?
* “the eternal dwellings” – would they have looked at a Heavenly perspective?
* Two very familiar sayings in our day. How would they have been perceived in the days of Christ? “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much” and “No servant can serve two masters.”

**Section 5. Issues & Commentaries: Lay out interpretive options/defense.**

During my research, I found there was confusion shared by many biblical scholars regarding the motivation behind the discounted bills and why the master praised the steward.

Discounted bills: There are three common views of the reasoning behind the steward discounted the bills. (1) he knew the master charged a high mark-up for the goods, so the reduction made a more reasonable price; (2) he knew the master charged excessive interest, so the reduction made a more reasonable rate; and (3) he deducted his own commission.

I believe that the third option is the most reasonable one. It is my opinion that this is the only remedy (deduct his commission). The other two options would shift attention to the master – more insult to the master and possibly generate law suits by the debtors.

Darrell L. Bock authored both “The IVP New Testament Commentary” as well as the “Baker Exegetical Commentary.” The Baker Commentary is a much more detailed work supporting the same conclusions for this passage laid-out in The IVP New Testament Commentary. Bock believes that the steward’s activity is similar to the actions of the prodigal son, and that the mismanagement of resource requires a response.

He raises the question of whether the steward actions were inept or dishonest. Bock believes the steward’s dishonesty lead to his dismissal (but admits that either option may be right), and that his course of action was to help him be in good graces with his neighbors after the dismissal.

Bock also raised the question about the reduction of the bills – was the steward lowering the price, removing/lowering the interest charge, or removing his commission? Bock believes removing the commission is the more likely option. His reasoning is that the master wouldn’t commend him given the other two alternatives as they would imply master was dishonest (applying a large mark-up or charging excessive interest). Also, reductions would be a further injustice (from the steward to the master), and might lead to legal action against the master by the debtors. Given Bock’s choice, the steward has sacrificed what he could have taken now (his commission) and has given it to others (debtors) so he might receive gain (or good favor) later.

In the Baker Commentary, Bock goes into more detail about the magnitude of the debt. One hundred measures of oil would be about 3-years’ salary; one hundred measures of wheat would be 8-10 years’ salary for average worker; oil was more precious than grain thus received a higher commission; discount written in debtor’s hand would make the transaction look like it was the original.

Praising the steward: There is much confusion over the idea of a dishonest person becoming the “hero” of a parable. I don’t believe the dishonest steward was being praised for his dishonesty; rather, I believe that his actions were meant as a lesson for us (as believers) to learn. Be shrewd in your financial dealings (don’t let others take advantage of you). I believe that the steward’s initial actions were inept (mishandling the master’s assets) and his subsequent actions were dishonest (reducing the debt).

Stein wrote “The New American Commentary, Vol 24.” He agreed that this passage speaks of money and possessions (“eternal treasures”), and suggests taking the passage at face value. Stein notes that the steward was not called dishonest until after he reduced the bills. To me, this indicates that the steward was considered inept in handling the money. It also implies that the steward was dishonest in his reducing the debts. Additionally, Stein says that the steward was commended for being shrewd – not necessarily a good thing, but rather more of a “rapscallion behavior” (crafty rather than moral).

**Section 6. Meditation & Your Report about It:**

I thoroughly enjoyed meditating for more than four hours on the passage and my report. Reading the three articles by Smith, Pinnock, and Zuck was helpful. I gleaned the following - believers gain more insights by meditation on the Word; take time to listen to God; deepening friendship with God; and allow the Holy Spirit and God’s Word to work together (not new revelation, but new understanding of what’s there).

2014-10-26 30mins – Was the steward demoted or fired? As I meditated, I thought back to the times that I was demoted and laid-off. I was angry but did not seek revenge. Suspect that his motivation was more seeking to gain good recommendations or potential jobs rather than revenge. However, would someone hire him if they knew what he had done (inept work and then dishonest reductions)?

2014-10-29 30mins – I pondered who reported or accused the steward. Why didn’t he defend himself? Perhaps he was guilty? And what was he guilty of doing/not doing? "Squandering his possessions," "when I am removed from the management," "people will welcome me into their homes," "he summoned the master's debtors" - but shouldn't he have met them at their place? Why did he make them change their bills? Why not do it himself?

2014-11-01 15mins – Did the master give the steward an opportunity to defend himself, or were the accusations so compelling? Did the master have other indications the steward was not trustworthy? Was there a cultural issue concerning the levels of discount - 50% for oil and 20% for wheat?

2014-11-02 15mins – ‘A hundred measures of oil’ discounted to 50. During the time of Christ, there were coins, gold, and silver. But there was also trade or barter - exchanging one good/service for another. In this case, we are evaluating the price of oil and wheat. Why were these expensive transactions bartered rather than cash based?

2014-11-03 30mins – During my meditations today, again I thought about the times when I was laid-off. The feeling of worthlessness and concern about how I would provide for my family. All three times were unexpected; all three times were due to financial conditions at the company rather than my performance. I never thought about these things in relation to this passage until now. Was the manager really surprised if he knew that he was doing wrong? Did he deserve to be let go? Was he really let go or simply demoted? Was he covering his liability by having the debtors mark down their own debts?

2014-11-07 30mins – During my meditations today, I thought about my financial dealings with others. Most notably the new transmission that I purchased for my son's car (it has been in the shop five times since the purchase, each time with the same symptoms). I have tried being patient and understanding - thinking the best; now I'm uncertain whether I have been taken advantage of what to do (how can I be shrewd in my dealings without compromising my beliefs?).

014-11-11 15mins – During my meditations today, I thought about Jesus traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem with his disciples. Having travelled between NorCal and SoCal on I-5 hundreds of times over the past 40 years, I imagined what a rest stop might have looked like back then. Perhaps benches shaded by trees? Would there be vendors selling food and drink? And I thought that maybe as Jesus was talking, this might be the place where Pharisees walked by and scoffed at them. Previously, I had imagined that the Pharisees were together with the disciples so would have been intentionally close enough to hear Jesus speak. But today I thought a bit differently. Perhaps the scoffing wasn’t even related to what Jesus was saying, but rather a general scoffing at His teachings as they walked past?

2014-11-12 30mins – During my meditations today, I thought about the whistleblower. Was he a disgruntled employee? Perhaps a personal enemy or someone who wanted the steward’s job? Maybe a family member of the master? Or perhaps just someone who thought the steward was not doing a good job?

2014-11-13 30mins – During my meditations today, I thought about the idea of the steward being inept or dishonest. To me, inept means negligent, lazy, foolish, not diligent; dishonest means cheating company, customers for personal gain. At face value, it doesn’t appear that the steward was dishonest in his mismanagement of the manager’s affairs.

2014-11-14 30mins – During my final meditations about the passage and the study, I thought about the money-related parables and narratives that we have studied and how they related to The Unrighteous Steward. The common thread was pointing to an eternal view of earthly treasures. Some were a bit different point of view. In the Lost Coin, the woman searches high and low, and then ultimately rejoices when she finds her missing coin. For the master in the parable of The Unrighteous Steward, he addressed the problem (fired the steward who was squandering his assets) but he did not rejoice as there was no remuneration (at least none was mentioned). In the Rich Man and Lazarus, the rich man realizes the consequences of his actions (or in-action to repent) after he dies; similarly, The Unrighteous Steward realizes the consequences of his actions (inept management of the master’s assets) after he is caught. The Rich Young Ruler was unable to give up his possessions and follow Jesus (earthly vs. Heavenly focus); similarly, The Unrighteous Steward was focused on his future income rather than feeling remorse for being a poor manager; in contrast, Zacchaeus the Tax-gather repented and gained a Heavenly perspective on wealth. I believe that The Unrighteous Steward and the “worthless slave” (Parable of the Money) were both inept in handling their masters’ assets because they were not motivated to do a good job (because the master would profit rather than them profiting). I was reminded of one of my favorite verses in Colossians 3 (under the NASB heading “Put On the New Self”): “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” –Colossians 3:17

**Resources:**

* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Vol 3B (Bock)
* The New American Commentary, Vol 24.
* The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, Vol 3 (Bock)
* www.biblestudytools.com/luke
* www.middletownbiblechurch.org/biblecus/biblec10.htm