Reexamination of the Ironical Interpretation of
the Parable of the Unjust Steward
in Luke 16

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Introduction

Almost every New Testament scholar, if not all, agrees that the parable of the unjust steward represents the most difficult of the parables in the New Testament or of the passages in the Gospel of Luke. The history of interpretation of the parable illustrates that it has been the crux interpretum. Over half century ago, Bretscher titled his article concerning the parable as “The Parable of the Unjust Steward - A New Approach to Luke 16:1-9.” Surprisingly, W. Arnott published an article titled...
“Steward in a New Light” about half century before Bretscher's publication. Intriguingly, two scholars coauthored an article at the dawn of this century concerning the parable whose title includes the word 'new': “Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8a).” This trend demonstrates that the parable has been drawing fresh attention repeatedly. It is thus not surprising at all that numerous scholars have been writing works to resolve the puzzles in the parable of the unjust steward.

Opinions are first divided concerning even the title of the parable, whether it is ‘the unjust steward,’ ‘the prudent steward,’ ‘the crafty steward,’ or even ‘the dishonored master’; each title reflects its basic interpretation of the parable. Scholarly views also vary as to where the

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6 For the works concerning the parable until 1990, see Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: A Historical, Exegetical Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13* (Leiden/New York/Koeln: E.J. Brill, 1992). Many works have been published since then. Ryan S. Schellenberg lists about fourteen works, except for his own article, on the parable since 1990 (“Which Master? Whose Steward? Metalepsis and Lordship in the Parable of the Prudent Steward [Lk 16:1-13],” *JSNT* 30 [2008]: 283-88). He omits some scholars’ works. For their works, see the bibliography at the end of this article.

7 As listed above, Bretscher and Arnott title the parable as ‘the unjust steward.’ L. John Topel employs the same adjective ‘unjust’ as they do. See his article, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Lk 16:1-13,” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 216-27. In a similar way, D.R. Fletcher and Bock call the parable ‘parable of the dishonest steward’ and ‘parable of the crafty steward’ respectively. See D.R. Fletcher, “The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?,” *JBL* 82 (1963): 15 and Darrell