

Is Astuteness a Christian Virtue?

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Abstract

Biblical exegesis has contributed immensely to the better understanding of the Christian faith. For instance, Catholic beliefs and practices, hitherto not accepted by some other Christian denominations, have become readily accepted or tolerated, all because of the educating power of exegesis. The areas where exegesis has immensely affected people are not just in religious climes, but also in social climes. For this reason, exegesis as a science has to be an ongoing phenomenon, because it will continue to help to clarify difficult and mind boggling biblical events and teachings with especially socio-economic consequences in them. The passage under study in this article (Lk 16:1-8) is one of those Jesus' parables that can be very easily misunderstood and so misapplied into life's situations when it is not properly understood and explained. The endeavour in this article is to try to understand this parable and to see whether it does make astuteness a Christian virtue.

1. Introduction

Certainly, every nation of the contemporary world and those of yester-generations had and have their problems. However, Nigeria's case seems a complete 'abracadabra' in that the more you look and try to examine its problems, the less you understand them. In 2004 and subsequently 2005, Nigeria was voted the most religious nation in the world. This is probably due to a high display of religiosity, which at times becomes extremely bigoted, by the adherents of all the known religions in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. But ironically, in the midst of this display of great religious presence, Nigeria was voted the most corrupt nation in the world in

the same period. Since then Nigeria has not made any notable improvement against such an ugly record, and seems little interested in changing its corruption index. This country still remains wantonly corrupt in almost every facet of its national life, among which is the arbitrary use of executive power to grant questionable presidential pardons, the on-going stealing of public funds in billions and the crass mismanagement and degradation of our socio-economic life. One is grossly afraid for the accusations our progenies will level against this generation.

It cannot be denied that Christians are among those who perpetuate this increasing level of socio-economic degradation in the country: Christians who supposedly see the Bible as the deposit of their faith and who hold that their faith and way of life is governed by the dictates of the Bible. This irony raises the question: is it that the Bible is not understood by these Christians in Nigeria or do they simply ignore it to follow trends and patterns of life dictated by a few, who constitute the enemies of our national progress? If the first option is taken, it means that there have been problems with Nigeria's biblical exegetical endeavours. It is this possibility which informs the question looked at in this paper: Is Astuteness a Christian virtue? Truly, the pattern in vogue seems to be that Christians who mismanage the nation and make arbitrary gains from their ungodly pursuits, see it as God's reward for their astuteness in the economic field and even glorify such ungodly gains in our Churches.

In this paper, we shall attempt to look at what Lk 16:1-8 says in relation to our topic. We shall first of all put our pattern of discussion in perspective by critically presenting the terms, 'astuteness' and 'virtue' in analytical definitions. Given that the passage under study is a parable, the article shall critically study parables with the intention of creating a conceptual and theoretical backdrop of analyzing our text. Our text will be interpreted using the contextual and historico-cultural analytical methods, in between which there will be some linguistic-semantic analysis to explicate and buttress issues that are raised. The article shall finally make a critique based on the findings of its exegesis.

2. Clarifications: Putting things in Perspectives

The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary describes an astute person as one who is very clever and quick to see what to do in a particular

situation, especially on how to get an advantage (A.S. Horby, 2010:76). This implies that an astute person is a cunningly shrewd personality, who through intelligent discernment devises means and procedures to act principally for his/her own gains. This could technically be taken as having insight that is heady, savvy and sharp-witted. Others may take it as common sense which they expect everyone to possess. The downside of being astute is to justify the means by the end, and so not give a hoot about the morality of the means used to gain one's concerns; this could be inimically disastrous especially for community and social advancement. Lk 16:1-8 seems to imply this. But is this really what Jesus meant to teach in the text?

Christian Ethicists or Moral theologians like Pazhayamphallil (2004:394) define virtue as "...a habitual and firm disposition to do the good". Mattison III (2008:6) says a bad virtue is vice. There is a relationship between habit and virtue. A habit is not simply a way of calculating how frequently a person performs a certain type of activity in a certain way; it is an abiding disposition that changes who a person is and resides in a person like a second nature. Therefore the virtuous person is not simply someone who consistently performs good actions, although that is certainly the case, but one who is transformed by his/her virtuous disposition (Mattison III 2006:16). Little wonder Pazhayamphallil (2004:394) holds that virtue makes one not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of him/herself, after having undergone self-transformation caused by his/her virtuous actions. This enables one to act spontaneously and automatically and thus the inclination to act well is easily "spreadable" to related areas in life. Therefore, the clarion call is for all to focus on developing virtues rather than simply performing good acts, in order that, in the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1803), we become like God. In sum, attending to virtue means attending to who a person is, inside as well as outside, in a manner that counting good actions alone cannot do. The importance of such interiority is particularly evident in Christ's Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew. Many are shocked when they hear Christ criticize people who pray, fast, and give money to the poor. But his dismissals in all three cases are of those who do these good acts "so that others may see them" (Mt 6:2, 5, 16). Synonyms of virtues are moral excellence, uprightness, goodness, strength, vigor, courage and worth.

Sequel to our discourse above, can we assert that astuteness is a virtue?

Not quite. Since actions and behaviours performed and displayed under the influence and guidance of astuteness can be immoral, unlawful and even against common good, because the basis of such actions and behaviours is the personal gains of the person: s/he comes first and all others come second. Ultimate good may therefore not always be the guiding principle of the actions and behaviours of an astute person, but his/her personal physical and material gains. By implication, s/he lacks the constancy for doing good. Virtuous actions and behaviours are performed and displayed with good in mind, based on morality, lawfulness and concern for the common good. The essence of good comes first for a virtuous person and s/he will not twist existing systems and institutions to his/her advantage as the astute may do: therefore is astuteness a virtue? Did Jesus mean to teach astuteness as a virtue in Lk 16:1-8? There are a number of fundamental issues to be treated in interpreting this text in order to arrive at whether the text sees astuteness as virtue. To put things in perspective, one has to first of all realize that the text is a parable. Understanding what a parable is and its function in Jesus' public ministry and teaching will help to sharpen our focus. That is the next line of this paper.

3. Understanding the Gospel Parables: Meaning, Nature and Purpose in the Preaching of Jesus

3.1 Meaning and Nature

Virkler (2005:162), like most biblical scholars, says that the word parable is derived from the Greek word *parabolē*, which means "to throw or place alongside." He understands a parable as something placed alongside something else for the purpose of comparison and this is done by using a common event of natural life to emphasize or clarify an important spiritual truth. Hence, Crossan's (1992:146) position that parables are possible or realistic fiction (but still fiction) is true, because in the process of using a common event of life to emphasize or clarify an important spiritual truth, the story could be fashioned in a historicized fiction. Hamm (2004: 609) therefore is right to say that a parable in the strict sense is a story about a fictitious, once-upon-a-time event. Among the examples he gave to support his position is that of the Prodigal Son in Lk 15:11-35. Hauck (2006:752) on his part says a parable "is an independent similitude in which an evident or accepted truth from a known field (nature, human life) is designed to establish or illustrate a new truth in the preaching of Jesus (kingdom of God, God's nature and action, piety). To achieve this,

most parables were designed and adapted to the deficient understanding of the simple people, by making explicitly intellectual concepts easier to understand through concrete illustrations from familiar fields. We say *most parables*, because parables are not easily understood as shown in the much debated sayings in Mk 4:11f, that by preaching in parables Jesus deliberately intended to conceal the knowledge of salvation from those outside the circle of the disciples in order that this might lead to a hardening of the people, which would make it ripe for God's judgment (Hauck, 2006:756-757). This can make it difficult for an exegete to make an adequate interpretation of parables. Lk 16:1-8, in this author's view, falls into the group of those difficult parables only easily understood through exegesis.

The Greek word, παραβολή (*parabolē*), occurs 50 times in the New Testament with 48 of such occurrences in the synoptic gospels, in connection with Jesus' ministry, suggesting that parables were one of His favourite teaching devices (Virkler, 2005:163). Parables in the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mk and Lk) were used to identify proverbs (Lk 4:23; 6:39), maxims (Mk 7:17; Mt 15:15), metaphorical sayings (Mk 3:23; Lk 5:36), enigmatic sayings (Mk 4:11; Mt 13:10; Lk 8:10), general rules (Lk 14:7), common occurrences (Mk 4:13, 30; 13:28; Mt 13:18, 31, 33, 36; 24:32; Lk 8:4, 9, 11; 12:41; 13:6; 15:3; 21:29), stories depicting remarkable singular occurrences (Mk 12:12; Mt 13:24; 21:33; Lk 18:1; 19:11; 20:9, 19), and paradigmatic illustrative stories (Lk 12:16; 18:9). But the Hebrew literary tradition gave the genre a much wider understanding in the use of the word *Māšāl*, with its most usual Greek translation, *parabolē*, meaning similitude or comparism with its wide range of applications which in most times was synonymous to metaphor.

The Christian tradition was consciously aware that Jesus spoke both in aphoristic parables and narrative parables. The aphoristic parables include the Wickedness Saying (Mt 6:36b), the Labourer Saying (Mt 10:10b; Lk 10:7b; 1 Cor 9:14; 1 Tim 5:18b) and the Disciple Saying (Mt 10:25a; Lk 6:40). The narrative parables are the most famous parables in the Jesus tradition. It is those, for example, that gave to our language the images of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. It must be remembered, however, that Jesus was an oral teacher and that those stories may well be no more than plot summaries of stories which might have taken hours to tell. Quoting Olrik (1909), Crossan (1992) speaks further of the epic "Laws" of folk narrative, and those

traditions of oral story-telling that are still obvious even in the necessarily summarized versions of Jesus' narrative parables. To mention but a few, the "Law of Three" appears in the path, rocks and thistles of The Sower (Mk 4:3-8; Mt 13:3-8 and Lk 8:5-8a); the "Law of Twins" appears in the first two servants in The Talents and the first two travellers in the Good Samaritan form a twinned situation as contrasted with the third one in each case; the "Law of Opening", moving swiftly from rest to movement, is evident at the start of The Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) or The Unjust Steward (Lk 16:1-7), but the "Law of Ending", returning terminally from movement to rest, is quite absent in those two parables. It is as if they are deliberately left hanging to force the hearers into judgment and commitment. Another feature of Jesus' narrative parables, apart from their oral character, is their normalcy. The realities of Galilean life peer out from the everyday actions of peasant women in The Lost Coin of Lk 15:8-9 and the lethal actions of peasant rebels in The Tenants of Mk 12:1-11; Mt 21:33-43

3.2 The Messages in the Parables and their Purposes.

The original message of Jesus' parables is thematically complex and conceptually difficult to grasp with precision. It concerns the coming of the kingdom of God (Mk 4:26-32; 13:28f; Mt 13:33), the great invitation (Lk 14:16-24), the eschatological separation (Lk 13:6-9, 17:26-29; Mt 13:24-30, 47-50), proper conduct (Mk 13:33-37; Mt 7:24-27; 18:23-35; 21:28-32; 24:45-51; Lk 14:23-32; 16:1-8) and God's reaction to the conversion of sinners (Mt 18:12-24; 20:1-16; Lk 15:11-35; 18:9-14). These concerns of Jesus' parable's original message are what Hauck (2006: 758) calls "...the great themes of His preaching", while Pope Benedict XVI says they constitute the heart of Jesus' preaching (Ratzinger 2007: 18). In certain instances, the original meaning is no longer discernible (e.g Mk 4:3-8).

Jesus' parables are thematically distinct from those of the rabbis which primarily served to expound the law. The objective of Jesus' parables is discernible from their indicative and imperative elements (address and demand): Their intent is to transform the hearer. Therefore, they are more than pedagogic aids, since Jesus' message functionally required the parables and Jesus' life gave the parables practical commentary (Haufe, 1994:16). Against the backdrop for Jesus' parable to transform hearers, Pope Benedict XVI elucidated on the purpose of Jesus' parables. Quoting scholars like Joachim Jeremias, the Holy

Father says that “parables announce a genuine religious humanity and for this reason they are stripped of their eschatological import. Inadvertently Jesus is so to say transformed into an 'apostle of progress', a teacher of wisdom who inculcates moral precepts and a simplified theology by means of striking metaphors and stories (Ratzinger (2007:186). This is one of the goals of Lk 16:1-8, for it calls for change in its hearers, a point which this article's exegesis will buttress. Furthermore, Pope Benedict XVI says that by means of parable Jesus brings something distant to within their reach, so that using the parable as a bridge, they can arrive at what was previously unknown. A twofold movement is involved here. On one hand, the parable brings distant realities close to the listeners as they reflect upon it. On the other hand, the listeners themselves are led onto a journey. So parables demand the collaboration of the learner, for not only is something brought close to him/her, but s/he him/herself must enter into the movement of the parable and journey along with it. Since parables have as an objective to reveal truths, they can cause a lasting impression, often far more effectively than ordinary discourse. The truths that parables reveal do not concern primarily socio-anthropological matters; they also have their theological dimension, which in a Christological undertone announces the proximity of the coming of God's kingdom presented in a variety of ways through parables to hearers. The talk on the purpose of parables will be incomplete when it neglects the fact that parables help to teach about the kingdom of God, a theme so central in the ministry and teaching of Jesus. The aim of course is to make listeners and readers (Virkler, 2005: 163) journey into the desire for change for the ultimate life.

3.3 Interpretation of Jesus' Parables

In the Jesus tradition, the interpretation of the parables is much more problematic. This is probably because the parables were often told concerning the kingdom of God that explained a symbol by a metaphor. This meant that the first hearers and final writers were themselves forced both to transmit and to interpret the parables at the same time. The presumption is that Jesus intended this effect, namely, that the parables would be both provocative and unforgettable, so that the recipient would be forced inevitably to interpret.

The parables of Jesus can receive external or internal interpretation. The most obvious mode of external interpretation is by commentary and from context. In this usage, the parable is given a detail-by-detail

interpretation, somewhat similar to The Sower in Mk 4:3-8, which was interpreted by Jesus in Mk 4:13-20. Apart from external interpretations from commentary and context, there are also manifold possibilities of internal interpretations by the very details imbedded in the story as it is told and retold (Crossan's 1992:150-151).

Since parables combine the qualities of narrative, metaphor and brevity, a parable must tell, in as short a space as possible, a story with a double meaning. One meaning will usually be quite clear on the surface of the narration. Another, presumably deeper meaning, or other possibly multiple meanings, lie hidden within the complexities of the narrative, and these challenge or provoke the recipient or hearer to interpretation. So parables are lures for interpretation and also revelations of the very process of interpretation itself (Crossan 1992:146-147).

Furthermore, Virkler (2005:165-8) adds a few principles for the interpretation of Jesus' parables. He suggests the historico-cultural and contextual analyses as a principle of parabolic interpretation, because it is used in interpreting narratives and expository passages. This is relevant because most of Jesus' parables are expository narratives, especially those ones that have an implied socio-cultural backdrop like ours. Since parables were used to clarify or emphasize a truth that was being discussed in a specific historical situation, an examination of the topics under discussion in the immediate context of a passage often sheds valuable light on the meaning. Another principle suggested by Virkler (2005:167) is lexical-syntactical analysis in the manner in which it is applied to other forms of prose for profitable expose of parables. Also of great importance is literary analysis with the view to arriving at the central and focal idea of any parable, and to place a significant emphasis on details as they relate to the focal idea. For instance, in the parable of the Sower in Mt 13:1-23, the central concept is God's word will meet with varying receptions in different people such as the person who fails to understand, the enthusiast who soon loses his courage, the person whose ability to respond is choked by worldly cares and riches, and the person who hears, responds and becomes a productive member of God's kingdom (Virkler 2005: 171-172). Finally, Virkler (2005:169-171) suggests theological analysis as a principle. To achieve a useful theological analysis of synoptic gospels' parables, the exegete must first of all define the terms "kingdom of Heaven" and "kingdom of God" since a

large percentage of Jesus' parables refer to the kingdom of God. Secondly, the exegete must aim at pointing out that the parables speak of the continuing ministry of the kingdom which has come (cf Mk 1:14-15). Then the whole idea of postponed-kingdom theory should guide the interpretation of parables especially for those parables that imply that the realization of the ideals and tenets of the kingdom are in the future.

In addition, critical research on the parables has distinguished between image and reality and has sought the third point at which the two intersect. While in this view, the parable and the parabolic story are understood as figurative stories, more recent linguistic theory maintains that the true metaphorical language is real, in that it is a functionally necessary language. Accordingly, parables should not be interpreted only or paraphrased: the truth is only present "in the parable as a parable" (Haufe (1994:15-16).

Our approach in the interpretation of Lk 16:1-8 shall touch on the different interpretative suggestions given, but we shall lay heavy emphasis on the contextual, historico-cultural, and the linguistic-semantic analysis with the intent of arguing to ascertain whether astuteness is a Christian virtue?

4. Exegesis of Lk 16:1-8

In comparison with other synoptic gospels, Luke uses the parabolic tradition quite differently. Virtually all of them appear in his central section, his ten-chapters expansion of that journey to Jerusalem (Lk 9:21-19:44). With singular artistry, Luke provides an appropriate narrative setting for the telling of the parables. For example, the Two Debtors (Lk 7:41-43) is part of Jesus' confrontation of Simon the Pharisee at the dinner party; the Good Samaritan story is Jesus' response to the lawyer's impertinent request for a definition of "neighbour"; Jesus tells the Rich Farmer example story (Lk 12:61-21) in response to a request for his intervention in a family financial squabble (Hamm 2004:610). In our passage, Jesus gives instruction about wealth, first to the disciples and then to the Pharisees in response to their ridicule (Lk 16:14-31). It has been observed that some full-story parables especially in Luke comprise a subset commonly called *example stories*. These are parables that present not an analogy but a specific use of human behaviour that is meant to be imitated or

avoided. Most commentators find only four example stories in the synoptic Gospels, all of them in Luke: the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37), the Rich Fool (12:16-21), the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) and the Pharisees and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14). Note that in the parables of the Unjust Steward (Lk 16:1-8) and the Persistent Wisdom (Lk 18:1-8), the human behaviour is not presented for direct imitation but as an analogy (Hamm 2004: 609).

4.1 Lk 16:1-8: Contextual-Semantic Analysis

Contextually, immediately preceding Jesus' telling of the parable of Lk 16:1-8, is the parable of the Prodigal Son in Lk 15:11-32 directed at grumbling Pharisees and Scribes (Lk 15:1-2), who do not readily accept that Jesus offers sinners another chance. Jesus' image of God is different from the one of the complacent Pharisees. For Jesus, mercy comes first, then the meticulous and all too human way of seeing justice. God is abundantly merciful as a Father and he summons people to the same divine attitude. Only then can the kingdom of God be tangible in this world (Noel 2010: 1487). The narrator signals a change in audience, because while the parable of the Prodigal Son was addressed to Pharisees and Scribes on the necessity of God's mercy coming first, the parable of our passage is addressed to Jesus' disciples, but the Pharisees do not fade from view for long (cf Lk 15:1-2; 16:14-15). The sayings that follow the parable in verses 9-13 continue the interpretation of the parable for the disciples. The point Jesus addressed to the disciples in our passage is cautiousness and reliability.

Furthermore, there are many complications to be resolved in an attempt to interpret this particular pericope. It falls into two sections: the parable in verses 1-8a which concludes with the Master complimenting the unjust servant for his prudence. A problem arises with the syntactic function of the Greek phrase (ὁ κύριος, *ho kyrios*) in verse 8a: Is the speaker the Lord Jesus commenting on the actions of the servant? Or is the speaker the owner of the property, the servant's employer? Most commentators opt for the latter and that seems to be the correct interpretation. Verses 8b-12 offer examples of early Christian moralizing about the content of the parables and possibly offers hints regarding the way it was treated in early instruction. There are three moralizing applications featured in verses 8b-9; 10-12; and 13. The break-down of the whole section would be as follows:

(i) Verses 1-7 contain the parable and verse 8a concludes the story with the "master" praising the unjust servant for his worldly prudence, not for his dishonesty. As we earlier on observed about the nature of parables, the subject matter of this parable is taken from the multitude of daily socio-economic relationships of Jesus' audience. This parable's structure is simple and pregnant: Limited action with a maximum of three groups of persons, clearly delimited scenes, individual features clearly related to the main point, obvious broader significance and assumed truths (metaphors, parables) or unusual events (parabolic stories, illustrative stories) in order to arouse the interest of the hearer and reader. This significantly plays an important role in exegesis.

(ii) Then verse 8b offers a general comment, probably a practical observation to the effect that worldly people in the pursuit of money, fame, power, position, popularity and other limited goods evidence an industry and imagination that people in the pursuit of religious and spiritual advancement seem to lack, but should develop for their spiritual growth toward the Kingdom of God. So like the disciples, Christians are therefore enjoined to equally be shrewd in using their material goods in pursuit of the kingdom of God, so that when their "unrighteous mammon" fails them, they will have an eternal home.

(iii) Still in our contextual analysis verse 9 presents a rather different application of the parable giving it a definite eschatological dimension. The "friends" one is advised to make represent the angels, especially in 9b, where the plural "they may welcome" into "eternal tents" offers a circumlocution for God. The meaning is: use mammon (as the unjust servant did) for the needs or benefit of others so that when it fails, as inevitably it will with death or loss, your social service will help to save you. Understanding the admonition in this way and translating ἐν ,λυ. ἐν τῷ ἀδίκῳ μαμωνᾷ (*en tō adikō mamōna*), as "instrumental" (by means of) yields an interpretation that is consistent with Luke's view of material possessions throughout the Gospel. Disciples are not to make friends "of unrighteous mammon" but by means of it. Therefore the "eternal tents" allegorizes the reference to the debtor's home in verse 4. The admonition to make friends for yourself is reminiscent of the warning Jesus gave earlier to be reconciled with your accuser, even on the way to court in Lk 12:58-59. In context, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which follows shortly, gives this warning renewed urgency (Culpepper, 1995:309).

(iv) Continuing in our contextual analysis, verses 10-12 offer still another interpretation. This is a collection of related sayings drawn together both by their relevance to the parable and by catchwords linkage. The parable shifts from the eschatological to the temporal sphere and is concerned with fidelity in our day-to-day existence. Faithfulness and honesty are not related to wealth and power. One who is faithful over little will be faithful over a large amount. The contrast between little and much is then applied in two ways. First verse 11, if one has not been faithful over worldly wealth, how can that person be trusted with true wealth? Secondly (verse 12), if you have not been faithful over what belongs to another (the worldly wealth God has entrusted to you), then who will give you your own treasure in heaven? Here the unjust steward is no longer an example but a warning.

(v) Verse 13 is an independent statement that does not belong to the parable, but which concludes this unit of parables and related sayings, reflects a universal truth that whatever we make centrally important in our lives will be the most influential force guiding the conduct of our lives. In the Gospel, this verse is a call to total dedication to Jesus. So wealth, which can serve as a means and opportunity for securing one's place in the kingdom, if used shrewdly for the sake of others, can also become a Master. Materialism enslaves us, but God requires exclusive loyalty. The Shema reminded Israel, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart" (Deut 6:5). Since one cannot serve two masters, one cannot be devoted both to acquiring wealth and to serving God. Moreover, the way we use what we have reveals who we serve. The choice of having no Master is not an option; we can only choose the Lord we will serve.

Our contextual analysis shows Lk 16:1-8 as a lesson on how Christians are to be faithful in dealing with little things or vast resources. Whether we are as shrewd as a dishonest steward depends on whether we use our material goods, great or small, to help those in need. Then, when we worship God rather than our wealth, we will find that we truly have "friends in high places" (Culpepper, 1995:309). This means, our pericope is not a lesson on how astuteness can become a Christian virtue, but on how to be cautious in our dealings and to do them so as to attract people's confidence in us as reliable persons. It is also a lesson on how to positively use our wealth to gain for us the kingdom of heaven.

4.2 Lk 16:1-8a: Historico-cultural and Linguistic-Semantic Analysis

Having done a contextual analysis of our passage in the preceding section, let us see what historic-cultural and linguistic-semantic analysis will give us in our exegesis of this passage.

4.2.1 Lk 16:1-2

This story mainly concerns two figures mentioned in these verses: a rich man and his steward. The rich man may have been an absentee landowner, so the steward was the Manager of his property (Culpepper, 1995:307). Stewards were responsible for personal oversight of all labour, including its (natural) product. Luke's insertion of οἰκονόμος (*oikonomos:steward*) in place of δοῦλος (*doulos:slave*) in the Q parable of the faithful servant (Lk 12:42) takes this relation into account, but it is also no doubt influenced by the fact that Christian office bearers were called οἰκονόμοι (*oikonomoi:stewards*) of God. While in Lk 12:42 οἰκονόμος (*oikonomos*) refers to a steward who has been given responsibility over a limited area and who will be rewarded for managing it properly, by being entrusted with the management of all the possessions of the master, Lk 16:1-8 presupposes that the one designated, οἰκονόμος (*oikonomos*), already holds this position and is legally authorized to act and run estates or businesses the way he thought best, whether to his master's good or detriment. He fulfils the function of steward not only with regard to internal matters, but also with regard to things external (Lk 15:5-8). Through misuse of this trusted position, the οἰκονόμος (*oikonomos*) of our periscope is no longer able to exercise the office of steward in verse 2 having been exposed as unfaithful as verse 8 attests (Kuhli, 2000:499). The story begins when complaints are brought to the rich man that the steward has been "squandering his property", but the nature and manner of squandering is not explicitly told in the passage. That means there were acts of injustice and unreliability on his part for failing in his duty. In the present narrative context, the charge echoes the actions of the Prodigal Son in Lk 15:13. The οἰκονόμος (*oikonomos*) is in consequence asked to present the account of his Stewardship (οἰκονομία *oikonimias*) and prepare to quit his job, a decision he did not question.

4.2.2 Lk 16:3-4

Just as the parable of the Rich Fool and Parable of the Prodigal Son feature interior monologues (Lk 12:17-19; 15:17-19; cf. 18:4-5), so the

steward's interior speech, in these verses, is a significant turning point in the parable. Like the Rich Fool in Lk 12:17, he asks himself, "What will I do?" His addressing the rich man as "my lord" in v. 3 prepares for the recurrence of that term in v. 8, where its meaning has been debated. In distress, the steward considers his options: "To dig (manual labour)? I am not strong enough. To beg? I am too ashamed." Instead, his interior monologue tells us that he seized an alternative that will make him be welcome in others homes after he has been dismissed by his master (Culpepper, 1995:307). It appears that the Steward had anticipated that this day of reckoning might come as he said to himself: "I have known all along what I may do" (Cantley, 2010:113-114). That course of action is not explained, so the reader's suspense and curiosity build while the steward proceeds with his plans.

4.2.3 Lk 16:5-7

In response to his imminent crisis, the steward, in these verses, calls in the Master's debtors and summarily reduces the debt of each. In the situation presumed by the story, the master has apparently let out his land to tenants, who have agreed to pay him a fixed return in grain or oil. But the size of the reductions he made seem to reflect the arbitrariness of his actions and at the same time the volume of the rich man's wealth. The first debtor owes one hundred "baths" of oil. Since a bath is equivalent to nine gallons, this man owes nine hundred gallons of olive oil. The second debtor owes one hundred "kors" of grain. Estimates of the size of a kor vary from 6.5 to 10-12 bushels, and even Josephus gives inconsistent reports as to its meaning.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, a hundred kors of grain would have been a large amount. The rich man and his debtors were dealing in large commercial interests (cf. Ezra 7:22) and not in household quantities. Then, a debt of a hundred measures of oil is reduced to fifty; a debt of a hundred measures of wheat is reduced to eighty by the debtors themselves (Culpepper, 1995:307). Noel (2010:1487) questions if he was unjust in the actions he took in verses 5-7 in the face of imminent loss of job? If the answer is, yes, then the decision and remark of the Master in verse 8a is inexplicable.

R. Alan Culpepper (1995:308) interpreting the action of the Steward suggests that by reducing the amounts of the debts while he is still in the service of the rich man, or at least while the debtors still assume that he is the rich man's steward, he will gain their favour. This is

complete astuteness playing out, because the Steward is scheming out means and procedures for his own gains. This he does because he knew that the rich man would not be able to reverse his actions later, without losing face with his debtors, and the steward will have acquired a debt of honour and gratitude from each debtor that will ensure their good will toward him in the future. Furthermore, there is a difficulty in interpreting and accepting the steward's action of reducing the debts. Was he dishonestly falsifying the records in order to gain the favour of the debtors, or was he shrewdly sacrificing his own prospect of short-term gains for long-term benefits? The alternatives are these: (1) The steward was cheating the master by reducing the size of the debts; (2) the steward was acting righteously by excluding the interest that had been figured into the debt, an interest prohibited by Deut 23:19-20; or (3) the steward reduced the debt due by the amount of his own commission, which had been included in the debt. According to the first two options, the steward's actions cost the master a lot of money; according to the third, the steward sacrifices his own income. If the first option prevails, the steward's actions are illegal and dishonest, since he continues "squandering" his master's goods, as he has been charged. However if option number three is taken, the actions are entirely legal.

Looking at the historico-cultural system that obtained and especially against the backdrop of our linguistic analysis of who a Steward is in our exegesis of verse 1-2, scholars like Cantley (2010:113-114) and Noel (2010:1487) interpret the action of the Steward in verses 5-7 in the backdrop of the socio-economic practices that were easily carried out by a steward. So a steward could run his Master's business in such a way as to be able to make and pocket the commissions of business transactions, even though such payments were forbidden by Jewish Law (Ex 22:24; Lev 24:36.37 and Deut 23:2021). To get around these Jewish legal prohibitions, a steward had contracts drawn in which the Masters' sum and the interest for himself were totalled together. The sum total blurred the exact portion of interest (Noel (2010:1487) and within reason the practice was tolerated. Cantley (2010:113-114) says the Steward in our parable did exactly that but added excessively to the interest and got caught. The return on the deal, over and above the principle and legal interest, would have belonged to the Steward. This is a practice still contemporarily in vogue in Nigeria and even annoyingly abused as well. Against this socioeconomic practice Noel (2010:1487) adds that with a view to his impending redundancy, the

Steward in the parable has various contracts (oil, wheat) modified, the latter having been written by the debtors themselves. The Master was certainly aware of such practice which was tolerated as long as it was within reasonable reach and so praises his Steward because he drops his commission and thus secures his future (16:8a) (Noel (2010:1487) and also succeeds in securing the debtor's sympathy so that he can undoubtedly expect a favour for the period when he is without income (Lk 16:3-4).

We have from our historic-cultural analysis of this passage gathered a number of lessons; at this point we have learnt that foresight and being prepared for crisis situations in our lives is admirable prudence. As a Christian model, the Steward was not praised for his greed and dishonestly, but for his ability to meet a crisis with calm and presence of mind. What he offers to us is the practice of looking ahead to the reality that we have to give an accounting of how we have lived our lives. Faced with the crisis of death and judgment, and knowing the kingdom of Heaven is at stake, the prudent disciple keeps both always in focus and lives in such a way that he or she is prepared to meet the Lord (Cantley, 2010:113-114).

But Culpepper (1995: 308) insists on the dishonesty of the Steward as the best interpretation. He believes the Steward continues to squander the master's goods by arbitrarily slashing the amounts owed by his debtors. Accordingly, there is no need to reconcile the difference between the amount the debts are reduced, no need to explain what would amount to 100 percent interest on the oil, and no difficulty in working out the legalities of the steward's actions. If the steward was merely cutting out his own commission on the loans, as Cantley (2010:113-114) and Noel (2010:1487) advocate, then wherein did the Master stand to gain from these transactions? On this reading, the force of the parable is evident in v. 8a. A dishonest Steward – not just a shrewd manager – is praised. Moreover, the Master calls the steward "dishonest" or "unrighteous", another point that favours the first interpretation. The Steward cancelled his own commission or the exorbitant interest charged by the master (Culpepper, 1995:308).

4.2.4 Lk 16:8

This verse poses its own difficulties which we discussed in our contextual analysis and the difficulties have led to various proposals by interpreters who have sought to separate the “original” parable

from its present context. Did the parable end with verse 7 or verse 8a or verse 8? Taking verse 8a as the conclusion gives the parable a more satisfactory ending. "The Lord" is the Steward's Master and the parable has the characteristic unexpected twist. The Master praises the steward for his foresight, shrewd action, regardless of whether his actions are dishonest or merely restore the accounts to their proper amounts. Either way, he casts an aura of honesty and goodness on his Master and shrewdly provides for his own future. The debtors are now bound by honor to reciprocate the Steward's benevolence. Through the parable, therefore, Jesus admonishes his hearers to, in a given difficult circumstance, follow prudent judgment, cast caution aside, seize the moment of opportunity, and make provisions for their future before God. Verse 8b is a comment on the parable: "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." The terminology is distinctly Semitic, especially the reference to "children of light" (Jn 12:36; Eph 5:8; 1 Thess 5:5). Here the children of light are persons who have seen the kingdom dawning in Jesus' works and in his calls for a radical commitment to God's power to deliver people from corruption and oppression. The comment is attached to the conclusion of the parable by catchword linkage, picking up the term 'shrewd' from the preceding statement.

5. The Message of Lk 16:1-8

Our study has emphatically made it clear that the passage does not make astuteness a Christian virtue. The praised action of the Steward that enabled him retain his job and position is astute for sure. However, our contextual and historico-cultural study show that the action was not a virtue in any way, but an invitation to use material goods for spiritual growth and, by extension, enliven and promote the faith especially in our time. We have not really failed in this dimension and the Church has never really failed in using material goods for spiritual growth, enlivening the faith and proclaiming the kingdom of heaven, especially in the provision of socio-economic services. A very good example is the missionaries who used schools to do this. Today, in many parts of Nigeria, schools remain one of the most veritable means of evangelization at whatever level of education. The problem in the current trend is the situation where the people are compulsorily meant to contribute financially and professionally towards the building of such schools even from their meagre resources, but cannot benefit from such schools because they cannot afford to pay the

exorbitant fees for their wards. Furthermore, there are various initiatives introduced periodically for the raising of money for different types of church projects. The processes used in raising these monies are at times so astute and shrewd in nature, that they are deified and become means by which people are intimidated and cajoled to feel that they will not see the kingdom of heaven if they do not contribute - something reminiscent of the yester-years when indulgences were sold.

This parable's message is completely against such tendencies. It encourages that we wisely use our material goods to promote the kingdom of heaven. To achieve this, the parable encourages all to be cautious in their dealings and not to forget that which is of paramount importance, reliability: that is, people should be able to rely on Christians as worthy and trusted people, especially those Nigerian Christians in public spheres. Christians with the behavioural disposition of cautiousness and concern for reliability will apply effectively well all the theological and cardinal virtues into our socio-economic and Christian life.

6. Conclusion

An analysis of the Greek word often understood as astuteness is important here. The word is φρονίμως (*phronimōs*) and it simply means "being sensible". However, the application of the term, sensible, can vary according to contexts. In the Synoptic tradition, φρονίμως (*phronimōs*) occurs only in parabolic sayings. Mt 7:24 compares the doer of the Word to the wise builder who builds his house on a rock. The motif of φρονίμως (*phronimōs*) here is secondary. The point is that the wise servant throws himself into the situation in which he is set, taking directions from his master (Mt 24:45). Similarly the Christian who sets Christ wholly before him is wise and would order his life in accordance to what Jesus teaches in Lk 16:1-8. In the parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25:1ff), wisdom is preparedness, for everything depends on the actual encounter with the Lord. Here φρονίμως (*phronimōs*) invites Christians to be always prepared, like the Steward in our parable in verse 4, who already knew what to do should his plans for the commissions he expected fail him. In our text, φρονίμως (*phronimōs*) has the sense of being cunning: clever resolute action is imposed by the hopelessness of the situation, and the resultant urgency. In acting as he did, even the worldly person can be a model

for the children of light. So Lk 16:8 speaks of the superior wisdom of the “sons of this world in worldly affairs,” from whom Church members can learn to ensure their (eschatological) future and (according to Luke) to deal even now with “unrighteous mammon”: distributing it to the poor (Kratz 1994:440).

Our pericope is not about astuteness, but about being sensible. A sensibleness that works for good and promotes good. Our exegesis of this passage has clearly shown that the passage does not make astuteness a virtue, rather it demands of all Christians to use their common sense to gain for themselves the kingdom of heaven, but not through crooked means.

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