



## Faithfulness in Small Matters: A Biblical-Theological Analysis of Luke 16:1–15

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### ABSTRACT

*The pericope in Luke 16:1–15, commonly referred to as the Parable of the Unjust Steward, presents a complex and challenging theological message. This study aims to explore the concept of faithfulness in small matters as taught by Jesus in this passage. By examining the historical, social, and economic background of the New Testament world and analyzing the rhetorical structure and literary features of the text, this research argues that Jesus' primary emphasis is not on cleverness, but on the moral and spiritual integrity required in managing entrusted resources. Faithfulness in minor matters is shown to be a crucial indicator of one's readiness for greater responsibilities, revealing one's character and spiritual maturity. The passage underscores the Christian disciple's calling to live a life of integrity, detachment from wealth, and full devotion to God. This study affirms that faithfulness in small matters plays a formative role in shaping the authentic character of a servant of God.*

**Keywords:** Faithfulness; Stewardship; Luke 16:1–15; Biblical Ethics; Discipleship; Moral Responsibility; New Testament Theology; Jesus' Teachings.

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### INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, certain small matters are sometimes regarded as significant, while others are treated as trivial or simply ignored. When it comes to small matters, people often overlook them and let them pass gradually without notice. One of the small things frequently neglected in today's society is the matter of faithfulness. Faithfulness has become a rare and costly virtue in the modern era. Being faithful in small things including matters related to money is an essential aspect that reveals the authenticity of one's identity as a follower of Christ. Conversely, we often treat major issues as minor sins that will eventually disappear without consequence. This attitude is reflected in the story of the dishonest steward in this passage. Through this parable, where the steward (or manager) in a Roman context could be either a slave or a free person who had access to the master's wealth and acted as his agent in business affairs (Green, 2000, pp. 509–510), Jesus teaches a profound theological truth.

Luke 16 contains two parables that deal with wealth, honesty, and faithfulness. The first parable illustrates how wealth can be used for the well-being of others, while the second warns of the dangers it poses. Although the

passage discusses economic themes, its central focus is on integrity and faithfulness, especially in small matters. Luke criticizes the attitude of the rich who seek security in wealth while ignoring the needs of the poor. Through the story of the dishonest steward, Luke emphasizes the importance of responsibility in managing entrusted resources. Faithfulness in small things becomes the foundation for being entrusted with greater responsibilities. This message remains relevant for the life of the church and society today, where dishonesty in leadership is often encountered. Luke 16 challenges believers to treat material possessions wisely and to remember that wealth should not become the center of one's life (Evans, 1990, p. 216).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

Throughout Christian history, various methods have been used by interpreters to understand and interpret the Bible. Hermeneutics, from the early period, has served as a crucial link between daily human life and the Church (Robert M. Grant & David Tracy, 2000, p. 3). In examining and exploring this text, the author applies a hermeneutical method to uncover the meaning contained in Luke 16:1–15, which is the central focus of this study. This method assists the author in investigating the world behind the text (the world from which the text emerged) as well as the background that prompted its composition (A.A. Sitompul & U. Beyer, 1977, p. 214).

Historical criticism employs several approaches and is useful in addressing the historical sources of biblical texts, the emergence of particular events, and the underlying causes of those events (Law, 2012, p. 23). This method seeks to explain what a first-century author conveyed in Greek to his original audience, as New Testament texts were not written directly to modern readers (A.A. Sitompul & U. Beyer, 1977, p. 214).

The author aims to identify any shifts in word meanings or possible additions, substitutions, or insertions within the text compared to its original form. Since no original manuscripts exist today, and the Bible is transmitted through copies, the author will seek to understand the text's meaning as closely as possible to its original intent. The analysis will also explore textual forms that illuminate the structure and content of Luke 16:1–15, thereby uncovering its historical context, as well as its social and religious setting at the time of composition. Furthermore, the author engages in verse-by-verse interpretation (Textual Hermeneutics) to determine the context and interrelation of the main ideas, paying close attention to the theological trajectories present in the text (A.A. Sitompul & U. Beyer, 1977, pp. 343–344).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Interpretation***

In the preceding chapter, Luke emphasizes Jesus' compassion for the poor and the needy. In contrast, chapter 16 offers a series of warnings about the dangers of wealth. Luke 16 begins (vv. 1–8) and ends (vv. 19–31) with parables introduced by a similar phrase: "There was a rich man...". Both parables revolve around the theme of wealth. This chapter teaches that loyalty to one's master and faithfulness to God's law should lead to submission to His sovereignty and faithful service (Edwards, 2015, p. 434).

The parable in this text begins with Jesus teaching His disciples, introducing a story featuring two characters with contrasting roles. The master is a wealthy man with substantial holdings, while the servant, acting as his steward, is responsible for managing his master's resources. Within the Roman context, a steward whether a slave or a freedman was granted access to his master's wealth and acted as his agent in business dealings. As such, this steward enjoyed significant status. For him, losing his managerial role meant a loss of social standing, potentially

reducing him to the status of a beggar (v. 3) a fate associated with shame, impurity, and marginalization (Green, 20, pp. 510–511).

The steward's dismissal prompts a critical reflection on his future. The Greek verb ἀφαιρείται indicates a process of removal. In his internal dialogue (εἶπεν δὲ ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὁ οἰκονόμος), he contemplates his options. His rhetorical question, "What shall I do?", echoes similar moments of existential reflection elsewhere in Acts (e.g., Acts 2:37; 3:10–14; 12:17–18). Realizing he lacks both the physical strength for manual labor and the humility to beg (αἰσχύνομαι ἐπαιτεῖν), he recognizes the need for a strategic solution (Marshall, 2004, p. 757).

In verse 4, his inner turmoil gives way to a sudden realization: ἔγνων τί ποιήσω ("I know what I will do"), a decisive statement in the aorist tense. This marks a shift from despair to optimism. The steward devises a plan to secure his future by forging relational capital winning favor with others who might later offer him hospitality or employment. The verb "to receive" in this context carries the connotation of being "welcomed" (NIV). His actions, while self-serving, align with the expected shrewdness of a household manager (Edwards, 2015, p. 800).

After his dismissal, the steward reduces the debts owed by his master's clients. This may be understood as a reduction in interest, aligning with Old Testament laws against usury (see Deut. 15:2). By doing so, the steward seeks to legitimize his actions through scriptural precedent (Evans, 1990, p. 215). Ironically, his dishonesty becomes the means by which he secures his survival (Green, 20, p. 593).

In verse 6, one debtor owes a hundred measures of oil equivalent to about 900 gallons, representing more than a year's wages. Another owes a hundred measures of wheat 350 to 400 liters. The steward reduces the debt by one-fifth. This suggests a scale of transaction well beyond small-scale farming; it is more likely related to land leasing or commercial loans, indicating the master's significant wealth (Nolland, 2000, p. 802; Edwards, 2015, p. 800).

By offering these reductions, the steward presents himself as generous, aiming to secure favor from the debtors. His shrewdness, though ethically questionable, demonstrates his ability to navigate crisis. Still, he remains within the danger zone, subject to the unpredictable consequences of his actions (Nolland, 2000, p. 802).

The steward is clearly not a model of honesty; his behavior is deceitful. Surprisingly, however, the master commends him not for his ethics, but for his cleverness. Some scholars suggest the master appreciated the steward's ability to make him appear magnanimous. Others argue the reductions reflect a legitimate cancellation of unlawful interest, consistent with Old Testament law (Deut. 23:19). The "children of this world" (those who prioritize worldly gain) are contrasted with the "children of light" (1 Thess. 5:5; Eph. 5:8; John 12:36), who live according to divine principles. The Greek word adikos ("dishonest") shares the same root as adikia ("unrighteousness"), connecting verses 8 and 9 thematically (Edwards, 2015, p. 804).

The phrase Καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω ("And I say to you," v. 9) marks a transition to Jesus' own commentary. Here, "mammon" (money or wealth) is described as unrighteous or worldly. The term comes from the Hebrew aman ("to trust"), highlighting the misplaced trust in wealth. The use of οἰκίας (house or tent) suggests a temporary dwelling, not a permanent home. Luke challenges his audience to view wealth as a test of faithfulness. If one cannot be trusted with "unrighteous wealth," how can one be entrusted with true spiritual riches? (v. 11; Nolland, 2000, p. 806).

The expression ὁ πιστὸς ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ ("faithful in little") contrasts with ὁ ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ ἄδικος ("unjust in little"). The message is clear: faithfulness in small matters reflects one's capacity to be faithful in greater ones, and vice versa. This principle is echoed in verse 9 and further developed through the contrast between worldly and spiritual wealth (Green, 20, p. 514).

In verse 12, worldly wealth is equated with ἀλλότριος (“what belongs to another”), emphasizing that it is not truly ours. Heavenly treasure, by contrast, is a permanent inheritance for the disciples something no one can take from them. Christians must recognize that their lives and possessions ultimately belong to God. If they cannot be faithful with what is not theirs, they will not be entrusted with what is rightfully theirs in the life to come (Marshall, 2004, p. 764).

The subsequent verse issues a stark warning against serving two masters. In the ancient world, a slave could not divide loyalty between two owners. Similarly, no one can serve both God and mammon. To love one is to hate the other (μισέω); to cling to one (ἀντέχομαι) is to despise the other (καταφρονέω). Attempting to serve both inevitably leads to failure in fulfilling God’s call for exclusive devotion (Marshall, 2004, p. 765). This verse declares that Christians owe their allegiance to God, not to wealth.

This teaching provoked the ridicule of the Pharisees, who were described as lovers of money (vv. 14–15). It is clear that not only the Sadducees, but also the Pharisees, were drawn to wealth. They believed wealth was a sign of divine blessing and a means to display one’s piety. Jesus’ poverty, and that of His followers, was mistakenly viewed by them as a lack of divine favor. This assumption is refuted directly in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (vv. 19–31). In verse 15, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for seeking to justify themselves before men, but God sees their hearts (Evans, 1990, p. 220).

Jesus exposes the Pharisees' self-righteousness: they gave alms not from genuine compassion, but to appear righteous before others. They claimed their wealth was a reward for their piety. Jesus challenges this notion, revealing the hypocrisy of outward religiosity disconnected from true devotion (Marshall, 2004, p. 767).

### ***Theology***

The Gospel of Luke presents a series of teachings in the form of parables addressed to the scribes and the Pharisees (Luke 15:1–3). Chapter 15 opens with three parables specifically directed at these religious leaders (vv. 1–2). As tax collectors and sinners gathered to hear Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” They mocked Jesus for associating with those they deemed unclean and unworthy of fellowship. In response, Jesus tells three parables: the parable of the lost sheep (vv. 1–7), the lost coin (vv. 8–10), and the lost (or prodigal) son (vv. 11–32). These parables collectively emphasize the themes of repentance, the restoration of the lost, and divine compassion.

The structure of the parables is deeply symbolic. In the first, the lost sheep is found outside the fold, representing those who wander far from the community. In the second, the lost coin is discovered within the home, highlighting what is hidden yet still within reach. The third and climactic parable unites both motifs: a rebellious son must be both awaited and sought after by the father. All three parables and especially the third bear witness to the unwavering love of God for the lost, which forms the very heart of Jesus' mission: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10; Edwards, 2015, p. 425).

In the following chapter (Luke 16), Luke broadens the audience for Jesus' teaching. Here, the focus shifts to the attitudes and behaviors disciples must avoid, particularly in relation to material wealth. This chapter becomes foundational for Jesus’ teaching on possessions. The parable found in Luke 16:1–9 explores themes of stewardship and loyalty to God, illustrated through the unexpected generosity of a wealthy master toward a poor servant who could offer nothing in return. The passage raises important ethical questions about the use of wealth and how it can reflect one’s ultimate allegiance.

The topic of wealth is a recurring theme in Luke's Gospel. Besides this passage, wealth is addressed in Luke 12 (the parable of the rich fool), Luke 14 (the place of honor and humility), Luke 15 (especially in the lost coin and prodigal son parables), Luke 18 (the difficulty of the rich entering God's kingdom), Luke 19 (the parable of the minas), and Luke 21 (the widow's offering; Green, 2020, pp. 587–588).

The social context of Jerusalem during the time of Luke's Gospel was deeply stratified. Society was divided into upper classes those with political power and economic wealth and lower classes composed of craftsmen, soldiers, and traders. The lowest class consisted of those who lived in extreme poverty and lacked the resources for a sustainable life. The social structure was profoundly unjust. The poor often suffered systemic oppression; their basic rights were disregarded, and they were subject to exploitation.

This injustice also extended to gender roles. In this patriarchal society, male children were privileged over females, and this favoritism was reflected in religious, social, and legal systems. Discrimination between boys and girls was deeply ingrained, and female children faced systemic marginalization. Against this backdrop, Luke's Gospel stands out for its special concern for social realities and its emphasis on God's preferential care for the poor and the marginalized (Thomas Hwang, 2021, p. 81).

The pericope in Luke 16 includes the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, as well as additional teachings from Jesus related to money. Much of this material is unique to Luke's Gospel. One traditional interpretation holds that the wealthy man commends the manager not for his dishonesty but for his cunning he acted decisively after learning he was to be dismissed, securing his future by reducing others' debts and thus winning their favor. This portrayal suggests that the manager's cleverness in crisis is noteworthy, even if morally ambiguous (Evans, 1990, p. 217).

Luke presents Jesus as the Savior who offers universal forgiveness without distinction between Jew or Gentile, male or female, righteous or sinner. Early church figures such as Irenaeus (c. 185 AD) affirmed that Luke, a companion of Paul, compiled this Gospel based on apostolic proclamation. This view is also supported by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian (Geldenhuys, 1993, p. 18). Luke's Gospel is particularly evangelical in tone, encouraging Gentiles to place their faith in Christ. Its central purpose is to emphasize God's concern for the poor, the socially excluded, and those overlooked by society (Michael Manning, 1996, p. 23).

### ***Theoretical Foundation***

The Hebrew root word 'aman (in the Niphal form) conveys the sense of trustworthiness and reliability. In several biblical instances, it implies being entrusted with something of value (e.g., Numbers 12:7; 1 Samuel 3:20). In the Old Testament, the term often translated as "faithfulness" is 'emeth, which appears approximately 127 times and denotes truth, reliability, and steadfast loyalty.

In Greek, the verb *pisteuō* carries the idea of placing one's trust or confidence in something or someone. It implies a personal conviction or belief that leads to reliance. Closely related is the verb *pepoitha*, which refers to a settled trust an assurance that continues to have an effect in the present. It is used, for instance, in Isaiah 10:20 to describe the people of Israel relying not on their oppressors, but on the Lord.

Wisdom literature in the Psalms also expresses this concept of trust (e.g., Psalm 24:2; 56:1), framing it in terms of loyalty to God's covenant. Biblical trust distinguishes sharply between placing faith in God and relying on humans, idols, or material possessions (cf. Isaiah 17:7; 32:3; 36:6; Jeremiah 7:4; Psalm 118:8).

In the Hebrew Bible, the root *bataḥ* translated as “trust” occurs around 80 times and underscores the basis of Israel’s hope in God. The noun form *pepoithesis* appears only once in the Septuagint (1 Kings 18:19), derived from *bataḥ* and signifying secure confidence (Collin Brown, 1975, p. 589).

### **Understanding the Wisdom of God Through a Life of Faithfulness**

The term *pistos* in the New Testament reflects a theological continuity and development from the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. Unlike its common usage in classical Greek or the Septuagint (LXX), where *pistos* was often associated with trustworthiness in general terms, the New Testament connects *pisteuo* meaning “to believe” explicitly to significant events in the life of Jesus (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 4:14; Romans 10:9) and to confessional Christological affirmations (e.g., John 20:31). Paul, in particular, uses *pistos* to emphasize the nature of saving faith a faith that receives the message of the gospel and responds to it (Romans 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 1:8). In contrast, *apistia* denotes unbelief or untrustworthiness, while *apisteo* and *apistos* similarly convey meanings of disobedience and lack of reliability. As Collin Brown (1975, p. 601) notes, *pistos* in Pauline theology signifies not only intellectual assent but also a lived-out faith rooted in loyalty to God and expressed in gospel-driven behavior.

In the practical life of believers, faithfulness (*pistos*) is not merely a doctrinal concept but a spiritual discipline shaped by divine wisdom. Christian life unfolds amid the complexities and evolving pressures of the world. The increasing demands of economic survival and the societal drive toward material success can often tempt individuals to prioritize personal gain over spiritual integrity, at times even justifying unethical means to achieve those ends. It is precisely within such a context that the parable of the rich man and his steward (Luke 16:1–15) becomes crucial for reflection. This passage reminds us that every person, regardless of their social or economic status, remains under God’s sovereign care and ownership. Consequently, all human actions carry spiritual weight and are subject to divine evaluation.

To live as a Christian, therefore, demands more than a profession of faith it calls for consistent and resilient faithfulness. This is no simple task in a world filled with distractions, temptations, and fleeting pleasures. Faith in Christ grants spiritual discernment, enabling believers to recognize and pursue God’s will. Just as physical eyes enable humans to perceive the visible world, so spiritual vision is necessary to walk faithfully with God. Life direction and future aspirations should thus align with one’s faith commitment and covenantal loyalty to God (Miranda, 1986, p. 148).

Tragically, many Christians today gradually drift from their faithfulness to God. Though they still claim to follow Christ, the allure of worldly pleasures often undermines their spiritual convictions. This erosion of faith often begins with seemingly minor compromises such as a child hiding the truth from their parents, a worker neglecting small responsibilities, or a student cheating in academic tasks. These seemingly trivial acts are, in fact, revealing indicators of one’s spiritual fidelity. Unfortunately, such expressions of faithfulness are frequently underestimated or overlooked.

In light of these challenges, it is essential to recognize that the temptation to compromise often begins in the small, everyday choices. Christians may pursue career advancement, wealth, or social prestige, and in doing so, they may gradually neglect their spiritual calling. Faithfulness in minor matters becomes a divine testing ground for greater responsibilities. God, who often entrusts His people with small things first, does so not to indulge them with blessings but to cultivate a deeper dependence and understanding of true faithfulness (Minandar, 2020, p. 189).

Through this parable, Jesus instructs His followers to steward their resources with integrity and accountability. The contrast between the "children of light" and the "children of this world" underscores this ethical challenge. Believers, as children of light, are expected to exercise godly wisdom in navigating worldly realities being both prudent and pure. Such prudence does not imply cunning manipulation but rather spiritual astuteness, the ability to recognize divine opportunities and respond with sincerity (Ismail, 2003, p. 42).

This teaching further affirms that all wealth ultimately belongs to God. Humans are merely stewards, accountable for how they manage what has been entrusted to them. True faithfulness in stewardship brings divine blessing not just in material terms, but in spiritual maturity. Jesus clearly states that no servant can serve two masters. This is not simply a warning about multitasking or misplaced priorities, but a theological assertion of exclusivity: devotion to God and devotion to wealth (mammon) are fundamentally incompatible. Though it is possible to possess both God and wealth, one cannot serve both. Actions involving money often expose the heart's true allegiance despite outward claims of loving God (Simon, 2020, p. 43).

A faithful servant must exhibit unwavering loyalty to their master. Such faithfulness is demonstrated through responsible actions and sincere intentions. Without sincerity, faithfulness collapses into hypocrisy; but with integrity, it produces trustworthy conduct. These same qualities are essential for all believers today, as each Christian is, by vocation, a servant of Christ. Our earthly lives, with their responsibilities and decisions, are part of the accountability we owe to Christ, who will ultimately judge the faithfulness of His people. Thus, Christians are called to be faithful and trustworthy stewards, living lives marked by integrity and commitment (Darmawijaya, 2007, p. 71).

## **CONCLUSION**

From the study of Luke 16:1–15, it can be concluded that the parable of the dishonest steward conveys a profound message about the value of faithfulness in small matters as a reflection of one's spiritual integrity. In the teachings of Jesus, true faithfulness is not primarily demonstrated in grand, public acts of responsibility, but rather in the seemingly insignificant details of everyday life where character is most genuinely tested. This kind of faithfulness reveals a trustworthy disposition and serves as a foundational quality for greater responsibilities, especially those concerning eternal and spiritual matters.

Moreover, this passage sharply contrasts the values of the Kingdom of God with the prevailing mindset of the world, which is often driven by pragmatism, materialism, and a disregard for honesty. Jesus does not commend the steward's cunning as a moral virtue; rather, He emphasizes the wise use of worldly resources for eternal purposes. The parable calls Christ's followers to be faithful servants not to wealth, but to God. Thus, faithfulness in the smallest of things becomes a tangible expression of a life wholly committed to God, free from the bondage of material possessions.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made. First, for individual Christians, it is essential to understand that faithfulness in small things such as honesty, responsibility, and wise stewardship of one's resources is not peripheral but central to spiritual life. One does not need to wait for dramatic moments to express loyalty to God; rather, daily acts of integrity are where true discipleship takes root.

Second, for the church and theological education institutions, this passage should serve as a rich resource for spiritual formation and ethical instruction. It can help cultivate a deeper awareness of the importance of living a trustworthy life, in alignment with the values of God's Kingdom. Faithfulness, shaped through the discipline of everyday obedience, should be emphasized in discipleship programs, leadership development, and community engagement.

Third, future research would benefit greatly from an interdisciplinary approach that combines biblical studies, Christian ethics, and socioeconomic analysis. Such a methodology would allow the moral and theological values of Luke 16:1–15 to be applied more effectively in today's ecclesial and societal contexts. Addressing contemporary issues such as economic justice, personal integrity, and spiritual accountability through the lens of this parable can offer both prophetic critique and pastoral guidance in an increasingly complex world.

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