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'I am not strong to dig and I am afraid to beg': Social status and status concern in the parable of the Dishonest Steward (Lk 16:1–9)

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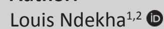

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This article offers a reading of the parable of the Dishonest Steward from the perspective of Greco-Roman status concern. It observes that the parable has a long and complicated history of interpretation. The different approaches in the reading of the parable reveal the unresolved quest in scholarship to establish a reading of the parable that takes into account both the steward's act of generosity towards his master's debtors and the praise that follows this action. This article proposes the Greco-Roman status concern as a framework for understanding the meaning of the parable in its original context. Status concern was the spirit of tenacity in maintaining one's status and honour against all odds characteristic of Greco-Roman honour and shame culture. The article argues that when the parable is read within its literary context, it reveals that at the heart of Jesus' message in the parable is the theme of persistence as an attribute of authentic discipleship. This understanding of the parable resonates with the entrenched Greco-Roman spirit of status concern. The interpretation would also have been relevant to Luke's Greco-Roman auditors living on the periphery of the Greco-Roman culture with the constant pressures to conform to the ethos of the larger social context. The steward's resolve to maintain his status even in the most difficult circumstances provided a paradigm for those Christ-followers to remain steadfast in the faith against all odds.

Contribution: The article presents an alternative interpretation of the parable of the Dishonest Steward. By proposing status concern as an interpretative framework, it offers both new insights into the socio-economic and socio-cultural realities of Luke's world and the continuing evidence of the contribution of Greco-Roman world to the development of the New Testament texts.

Keywords: Dishonest Steward; digging and begging; honour and shame; status concern; Greco-Roman world; parable; discipleship; gospel of Luke.

Introduction

The parable of the Dishonest Steward remains one of the most studied of Jesus' parables. As a result of the immense interest it has generated over the centuries, it is not easy to give a complete account of the history of its interpretation. A brief survey of key studies on the parable demonstrates a mosaic of approaches. Some scholars have interpreted the parable from the perspective of financial investment and eschatological preparedness (Baergen 2006:25–38) or as an encouragement to the rich outside the Christian community to use their wealth to make friends of Jesus' poor disciples (Burket 2018:326–342). Other perspectives present the parable as a paradigm for understanding a Christian, responsible stewardship of the Lord's resources (see Culpepper 1995:308; Lygre 2002:22–28; Reinstorf 2013:1–7), whilst King (2018:18–25) and Myers (2012:17–34) think that the thrust of the parable is reconciliation or debt reduction. Similarly, Cowan (2006:25) views the parable as an encouragement against the negative force of greed and the positive force of faithful and honest self-interest. In this case, as Adewale (2013:125–130) puts it, the parable is a call on Jesus' disciples to be faithful in the use of wealth to promote Jesus' objective and not ostentatious living.

The above approaches offer insightful perspectives to the interpretation of the parable. They represent attempts to understand the basis of the steward's praise despite his obvious characterisation as dishonest. There are, however, some dimensions of the parable that remain adequately unexplored, which, if examined, could provide a new hermeneutical key to the overarching message of the parable. The parable's reference to digging and begging (Lk 16:3), when read in its literary context, reveals the Greco-Roman cultural ethos of status concern and the

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tenacity to maintain it, and is therefore potentially helpful in unmasking an important dimension of the parable's central message.[1] This article argues that Greco-Roman status concern and the tenacity to maintain it provides a framework for understanding the thrust of the parable. This reading of the parable agrees with Landry and May's (2000:287–309) honour-based reading of the parable. Landry and May argued that the meaning of the parable lies in the restoration of honour of both the master and the steward. It is a concern for employment that drives the steward into acts of generosity, which in turn paints a positive image of both himself and his master. The use of honour in the interpretation of the parable is also underscored by Van Eck's (2017:180, 181) recent study which understands the steward's action in terms of Ptolemaic and eastern Mediterranean royal practice of cancelling debt remittances, where the goal was honour and the desire to turn debtors into clients. Thus, according to Van Eck, like the elite of his time, the steward adopts debt cancellation in order to gain honour and turn his master's debtors into reciprocal partners. Van Eck's analysis provides a plausible and culturally realistic explanation for the action of the steward. It can, however, be argued that whilst the steward's action echoes Mediterranean royal ideologies of debt cancellation, the motivation behind such a debt cancellation was not just a mere question for honour but status concern (or defence of honour) (cf. Neyrey 1998:525). The imminent dismissal that loomed over his head provided the motivation for his action. The point of departure in this article is that the steward's action, understood with the larger context of the Greco-Roman society, represented the pervasive Greco-Roman cultural ethos of status concern. The Lukan Jesus employs this cultural paradigm as a pedagogical tool for his disciples. Based on this Greco-Roman concern of status for which the steward is praised, the early Christ-followers are encouraged to emulate a similar attitude in relation to their new status in the Kingdom of God.

This article has three sections. In the first section, it discusses status concern in the Greco-Roman world within the larger context of honour and shame. The second section examines the theme of persistence and status concern in the Third Gospel. The third and the final section presents a reading of the parable from the perspective of Greco-Roman status and its implications for understanding the message of the parable. This reading offers a new perspective to the interpretation of the parable. It also offers insights into the socio-economic and socio-cultural realities of the Greco-Roman world. The paper acknowledges the lack of scholarly consensus on the ending of the parable – whether the parable ends in verse 8 or verse 9. In this study, the end of the parable is seen as verse 9, as the reference to the use of wealth to create friends in verse 9 provides a salutary summary to the importance of status maintenance in the parable. This makes Luke verse 9 a fitting end to the parable.

1.The article assumes that the story in Luke 16:1–9 is not an allegory but a realistic story. This suggests that although it may have one central message, there are also several dimensions to its possible meaning. Drawing from its language and thrust, its original audience's unique circumstances could have determined how they perceived its meaning.

Digging, begging and status concern in the Greco-Roman world

Greeks and Romans were known for their love of honour and a strong detestation of shame. Honour involves an individual's claim for worth, value, prestige and reputation which is acknowledged by others (Eng 2019:194; Neyrey 1998:15). According to Malina (2001:30), at the heart of honour is the intersection of authority, gender, status and respect. Malina (2001:32) further argues that honour is gained through ascription or acquisition. The former is obtained by birth through the family or ethnic group, or by virtue of being bestowed by a person of authority such as a king or a god. Honour through acquisition is gained by excelling others in daily social interactions (Malina 2001:33). This type of honour can be won or lost on a daily basis through acts of benefaction and the antagonistic context of challenge and riposte. One of the enduring features of an honour and shame culture was the extent to which individuals took seriously the need to both care for and protect their honour, and to fight to retrieve it if it has been lost (Neyrey 1998:525). The dynamics of challenge and riposte, which defined interpersonal relationships in the Greco-Roman world, especially between non-family members (Malina 2001:35), underscore the significance of honour in classical antiquity. In his *De Finibus*, Cicero outlines how honour defined every human activity in the Roman world when he says:

> With what earnestness their rivalries! How fierce their contests! What exultation they feel when they win, and what shame when they are beaten! How they dislike reproach! How they yearn for praise! What labours they will undertake to stand for their peers! How well they remember those who have shown them kindness and how eager to repay it! (Cicero, *De fin.* 5.22.61)

Cicero's description of the Roman spirit here underscores how prestige and social status determined Roman behaviour. The description was also true for the Greeks whose love for honour is attested in literature (Fox 2005:68; Kurke 1991:93). For example, in his *Lysander*, Plutarch also underscores the Greek quest for honour when he reports:

> In Sparta, from a very early age they wish their boys to be sensitive toward public opinion, to be distressed by censure, and exalted by praise; and he who was insensible and stolid in these matters was looked down upon as without ambition for excellence, and a cumberer of the ground. Ambition, then, and the spirit of emulation, were firmly implanted in younger boys by his Laconian training and no great fault should be found with his natural disposition on this account. (Plutarch, *Lys.* 2.2)

Plutarch's statement above and that of Cicero before it, confirms that the quest for honour was the driving force in the formation of social, cultural and political identities and relations (Kuhn 2015a:10) in the Greco-Roman world. They show that being the best and maintaining that status was an inescapable individual concern in everyday life. However, as Pomeroy (1991:51) has argued, the maintenance of social status was not an easy undertaking. Either as a result of outcomes of political failure or difficulties in maintaining the

level of wealth, it was common for the rich and powerful to lose everything and become destitute. Even for the poor labourer (πένης), the concern to preserve his status amidst the ever-present fear that the deadly cycle of unemployment and sickness might deprive him of the little dignity they had, represented a significant concern (Pomeroy 1991:67). Pomeroy's observation reinforces the persistent and widespread nature of status concern in the Greco-Roman world. The observation also underscores the fact that although wealth was not always an indicator of social status (cf. Lk 19:1–10), loss of livelihood had implications on the nature of social connections one created and maintained.[2]

There are several examples in literature that illustrate the Greco-Roman spirit of preoccupation with concern for honour and status and its maintenance. For example, Greek noble families at risk from infertility, which threatened their continued existence, often took desperate measures to preserve their status. Fox (2005:39) argued that marriage to non-noble rich brides was one of the ways the nobles employed to re-establish the fortunes of their noble line and status. By maintaining wealth as a status symbol, in spite of the absence of nobility for the bride, the nobles ensured the maintenance of a respectable heritage. The Greek concern for *eugenics* through judicious mating was, therefore, partly driven by the need to maintain social status in perpetuity (see Galton 1998:263). At an individual level, the preoccupation with status and prestige and the need to maintain it was also endemic. Amongst Greek athletes Pausanias reports how the great wrestler Timanthes, upon retirement, kept his hero status by daily drawing a huge bow. When he could not maintain this prowess, he killed himself by diving into a bonfire, like the greatest wrestler, Heracles (*Paus*. 6.8.4; Fox 2005:67). His self-immolation represented a sustained identification with the great hero Heracles (Nicholson 2016:26). Thus, both in life and death, Timanthes maintained his hero status. Furthermore, in everyday interpersonal encounters, in Greek society and indeed all the Mediterranean cultures, the practice of challenge and riposte was an expression of concern for honour and status (cf. Crook 2009:593; Malina 2001:35).

The Greek spirit of preoccupation with status concern was also prevalent in the life of the Roman west. For example, Cicero's turbulent life represented mixed fortunes of status loss and the Roman fighting spirit to regain it. As Haskell (1964:296) argued, Cicero's career as a statesman was marked by inconsistencies and a tendency to shift his position in response to changes in Rome's political climate.[3] His nimbleness in fighting back and reclaiming his status, even in the most challenging circumstances, is an illustration of the Greco-Roman tenacity for status maintenance. Beyond Cicero, as Bodel (2015:32) has argued, status concern was also evident in the way families maintained significant control over the professions of their members. It is said that amongst some equestrian orders, social deviants who preferred the notoriety of the actor or the gladiator to the privileges of the equestrian rank were punished by expulsion or forced to conform. At an individual level, Martial reports how impoverished equestrian poets living on the charity of friends maintained their status by wearing their toga (Kuhn 2015:23). As the *toga* was a symbol of status, by wearing it despite their apparent poverty, the poets struck up an appearance of nobility and the status associated with it. This manipulation of the symbols of status demonstrates how, for many people in the Greco-Roman world, the maintenance, negotiation and renegotiation of their status was a crucial undertaking.

One of the critical factors that affected social status in the Greco-Roman world was destitution (πτωχεία). Both the rich (πλούσιος) and the labourer (πένης) dreaded the prospect of falling into destitution and living on charity. As Pomeroy (2015:41) argued, for most equestrians, falling below the minimum census qualification for membership in that order was a real concern. For the poor labourer, the constant fear of the loss of livelihood through lack of work was a constant concern. The same was true for the peasant farmer whose perennial concern was to subsist after paying all taxes and fees without falling into a spiral of debts and being able to feed the family including keeping the seed back for the next season (Pagola 2009:61). The challenge of being a labourer and the constant fear of falling into destitution is summarised by Lysias' disabled man who was claiming his pension:

> My father left me nothing, and I have only ceased supporting my mother on her decease two years ago; while as yet I have no children to take care of me. I possess a trade that can give me but slight assistance: I already find difficulty in carrying it on myself, and as yet I am unable to procure someone to relieve me of the work. I have no other income besides this dole, and if you deprive me of it, I might be in danger of finding myself in the most grievous plight. (*Lys*. 24.6)

This statement represents a complex web of inherited πενία, dependence on a trade, the importance of family for sustenance and the constant threat of slipping into destitution for the labourer. The reference to 'most grievous plight' is a translation of δυσχερεστάτῃ γενέσθαι τύχῃ μὴ τοίνυν, 'it will be hard to live accordingly'. The general perception of the time was that poverty deprived a person of the possibility of living a truly human life (Fitzgerald 1996:389). This understanding implies that destitution was the worst experience that could ever happen to an individual. Herodotus reports about an Egyptian king called Psammenitus who, during a Persian invasion, did not cry to see his son condemned to death but upon seeing a friend who had lost everything and had become a beggar (Herodotus, *Hist*. 3.14). Psammenitus'

2. Studies in Greco-Roman societies agree on the multidimensional nature of social status. It manifested itself in several coexisting social fields and complex hierarchies (Bodel 2015:29–44; Kuhn 2015:9–25; Pomeroy 1991:51–74; Verboven 2007:1). The criteria for the measurement of status ranged from birth, gender, wealth, education, ethnicity, to skills (Verboven 2007:1). Each of these contributed to an individual's specific social position in the community.

3. For example, as a result of political turmoil in the Roman Senate, Cicero was sent into exile in 58 BC. His house was also confiscated and desecrated (Everitt 2001:145). However, Cicero never gave up his life-long commitment to Roman politics. Thus, whilst in exile, he ensured that he kept himself informed of the developments in Rome through an endless stream of letters with friends. Through his connections and the constant awareness of events in Rome, he was able to take advantage of political changes in Rome to have his exile revoked and his property returned to him (Cicero, *Dom*. 5).

reaction demonstrates that for him, a noble and honourable death (for his son) was better than living a life of a beggar.

The problem of being a πένης (labourer) or πτωχὸς (beggar) was not only because of the personal tragedy they represented. The statuses also carried with them a social stigma that had an alienating effect on the poor in society. In his *Against Lochites*, Isocrates laments the dismal treatment of the πένητες (labourers) in the administration of justice, despite the equality of the rich and poor before the law (Isocates, *Ag. Loch*. 20.19). The relationship between πτωχεία and ostracism is also evident in Euripides' *Helen*. In the play, Menelaus, upon his return from Troy under disguise, recalls ὥσπερ πτωχὸς ἐξηλαυνόμην, 'like a beggar I was driven out…' from the gate (Euripides, *Hel*. 709). These examples demonstrate that being a labourer or a beggar represented the utmost challenge to both survival and individual status claim. This understanding puts into perspective the steward's dread for digging and begging (Lk 16:3) and the action he took to avoid them.

Persistence and status concern in Luke's Gospel

Elements of persistence and status concern characteristic of the Greco-Roman spirit are also apparent in the Third Gospel, particularly in Jesus' travel narratives (Lk 9:51–19:48). In this section, Jesus focuses his teaching on his disciples. Most scholars acknowledge the discipleship thrust of Jesus' travel narratives (Lk 9:51–19:48) (Fitzmyer 1981:826; Green 1997:397; Levine & Witherington 2018:268). In this section, Jesus' impeding suffering in Jerusalem forms the background for much of the travel narratives' teaching. One of the recurring themes in this section is the importance of persistence in the face of difficult circumstances. In the parable of The Friend at Midnight (Lk 11:5–13), which is meant to be a commentary on prayer, persistence and maintenance of honour form the major undercurrent. The shamelessness (ἀναίδεια v. 8) apparent in the continuous knocking of the needy friend, which his sleepy friend cannot ignore (Byrne 2015:121), underscores the potential shame they would all experience if the latter does not get up and assist with the bread. In the end, they both avoid the shame of failing to show hospitality to a guest-friend and their honour is thus maintained. In verse 13 God is presented as magnanimous giver whose father-son relationship with the disciples confirms his readiness to provide the disciples' needs. This sets the parable as a lesson on persistence in prayer. If prayer is an attitude reflective of a true disciple, its maintenance would ensure divine intervention in times of need.

In the parable of the Feast (Lk 14:15–23), the host's reaction after his friends snubbed him reveals, amongst other things, the Greco-Roman spirit of persistence and status concern. The friends' refusal to accept the host's invitation, understood in the context of honour and shame, was one of the humiliating experiences for a Greco-Roman male. Their behaviour not only demonstrated their poor estimation of him but also stood against the spirit of loyalty in friendship. The importance of loyalty in friendship is underscored by Theognis' makarisms, 'Ah blessed and happy and fortunate is he that goes down into the black house of death…having tested the loyalty of his friends' (*Ele. and Iam.* I. 1013–1016).[4] Within its Greco-Roman context, the friends' snub and low estimation of the host would have had significant influence on the community's perception of the host's worth and status. The host's reaction to his friends' action was a signal of his determination not to take the loss of his honour lying down. To reclaim his honour, he transformed his generosity from the closed circuit of social equals to non-reciprocal generosity towards the poor. By associating with the poor, he apparently created a fictive community in which his self-worth and status are upheld and valued.

The parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:1–7) and the parable of the Lost Coin (Lk 15:8–10) can also be read from the perspective of persistence and steadfastness. The context of the parables is the Pharisee's and the Teachers of the Law's derision of Jesus' association with sinners (Lk 15:2). However, in order to understand the meaning of the parables from the perspective of persistence and status concern, the value of a sheep and a *drachma* in antiquity sheds significant light. First, the value of a sheep was approximately equal to a shepherd's monthly wage (circa. 16 *drachmae*). Even more expensive was the value of a male sheep, which according to Van Eck (2017:168) was more than the value of the shepherd's monthly wage. Additionally, in those days hired shepherds had responsibility for loss of sheep. The implications of losing a month's wage for a labourer would have been devastating for a Greco-Roman male. The loss would potentially reduce him to a beggar and the shame associated with that status. Therefore, shepherd's relentless pursuit of the one sheep would have been motivated by a quest for survival and honour. Similarly, studies have also shown that the *drachma*, which the woman had lost (Lk 15:8), had a 2-day value of food (Van Eck 2019:2). This suggests that the loss of the *drachma* implied a significant change in her livelihood. This shift could have significant implications for her self-worth and honour. Her lighting of the lamp, sweeping and searching diligently in verse 8 b underscores her determination to maintain the value of her income. The success of her determination and persistence culminates in her celebration with friends (v. 9). Thus, in the two parables, the shepherd and the woman do everything within their power to reclaim and maintain their status. The disciples are, therefore, admonished never to give up in their pursuit of the sinner (vv. 7, 10) even in the context of social ridicule.

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11–31) similarly affirms the theme of persistence and attempt to reclaim lost honour. This concern for status can be understood from the perspective of both the son and the father. In the interpretation of the parable, some scholars like Kloppenborg (2008:169–94) place the accent of the parable on the son's wasting of his

4. The context of the above makarism is Theognis' talk to Kyrnos (119–128) that it is harder to recognise a loyal friend than it is to find counterfeit gold or silver. For him, true friends can only be revealed through trials and testing (963–970). In above makarism, Theognis, therefore, expresses admiration for those who never had to suffer at the hands of their friends.

inheritance; that the thrust of the parable is not in the younger son's asking for his inheritance before his father's death but rather in his squandering of it. According to Kloppenborg, this understanding conforms to the realities of inheritance in the parable's social context. In line with Kloppenborg's conclusions, it can be argued that the younger son failed to maintain not only his inheritance but also, by implication, his status. This resulted in his present state of destitution. Yet equally true to the realities of the parable's first audience was the reaction of the younger son to the deplorable state of penury and squalor that he found himself in. Being reduced from an heir to a fortune to a feeder of pigs (Lk 15:15) would have been the worst status-upset for a respectable Jew. Millet (2012:99) observed that as rearing of pigs was forbidden to the Jews (Lv 11:7; Dt 14:8; cf. Is 65:4; 66:17; 1 Macc 1:47; cf. 2 Macc 6:18; 7:1) and those who did were accursed, this was indeed as low as a Jewish boy could descend. Consequently, although he had already squandered his inheritance and had, as a result, no claim to it, the son was ready to salvage what was left of his status, even if it was only through association with his father's household as a servant (Lk 15:19, 21). Within Lukan churches, the prodigal son serves, inter alia, as a model disciple committed to reclaiming his lost status in his father's house, through repentance. The disciples are to do likewise.

Further, some commentators take the father's magnanimity towards his prodigal son as unprecedented and, therefore, paradigmatic (Jeremias 1972:28; Knight 1998:119). Whilst this view can be challenged in favour of placing the accent of the parable on the son's prodigality (cf. Kloppenborg 2008: 169–194), there is something about the father's attitude towards his son that would have presented a unique dimension to the parable amongst Luke's audience. As Van Eck (2017:167) has argued, it is in the 'abnormal' that the surprise and the meaning of the parable is to be found. Against this background, it is, therefore, likely that whilst the son's action of squandering his inheritance would have represented the unexpected and therefore abnormal in the parable, as is evident in Greco-Roman papyri (Kloppenborg 2008:169–194), equally surprising to the parable's first audience would have been the father's action towards his son. In the Roman world, the reputation of the *paterfamilias* (male head of the family) was, amongst other things, based on having an orderly household (Eng 2019:193). Epictetus' declaration, οὐαί μοι διὰ τὸ παιδάριον, διὰ τὸν ἀδελφόν, οὐαὶ διὰ τὸν πατέρα (Epictetus, *Diatr.* 3:19), 'woe unto me for my child, for my brother, for my father', expresses how one's kin can compromise one's honour and status. In view of this understanding – as Lieu, quoted in Levine and Witherington (2018:423), has argued – the father's surprising action towards the son can be described as 'the indignity of a respectable man running to meet his son with the crowds shocked at the absence of the expected and deserved rejection or rebuke' (see also Byrne 2000:145; Franklin 2001:947; Morris 1988:265). The condemnation of prodigality evident in Greco-Roman papyri (Athenaeus, *Deipn*. IV 144B-C; Aristotle, *EN* IV 1:1119b in Kloppenborg 2008) validates the fact that the younger son deserved censure and rejection from his father. As Kloppenborg (2008:169–94) rightly observed, even in a Judean setting, where the land was divinely acquired, prodigality was not only an offence against God, but also damaged the collective standing of the family by reducing its wealth and therefore its influence and honour. In a Greco-Roman first-century context, by refraining from punishing the son, the father's generosity was an act of sailing against the tide and, therefore, a real surprise to Luke's audience. Luke's Christ-followers are, therefore, advised to emulate the magnanimous father who was willing to receive a son deserving of all censure, even if his action was against conventional practice.

Persistence and status concern is also apparent both in Jesus' caution on the inevitability of stumbling blocks and the need to keep watch (Lk 17:1) and in the parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge (Lk 18:1–8). The word used for stumbling block in Luke 17:1 is the plural σκάνδαλα (Liddell & Scott 2007:637). In Matthew 13:41, Romans 16:17 and the *Epistle of Basil* 46:69, σκάνδαλα is used with regard to those things that cause stumbling or backsliding. Likewise, the parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge (Lk 18:1–8) takes up the theme of persistence and audacity in the face of obstacles. The New International Version (NIV) translation of the phrase μὴ ἐνκακεῖν is 'not to give up' (Lk 18:1). The translation agrees with the lexical meaning of ἐγκακέω which is to 'lose heart or grow weary' (LSJ at Perseus 2020). This phrase has the general sense of not losing one's motivation in continuing the desired pattern of conduct or activity (BDAG 2000:272). This meaning agrees with the recurrent theme of persistence in Jesus' travel narrative (Lk 9:51–19:48). The meaning is also echoed in Paul's injunction to the Philippians, κατεργάζεσθε 'you work out your salvation' (Phlp 2:12). The imperative form of the verb (from κατεργάζομαι) conveys two senses; the ability to achieve something by labour or being able to prevail over or to be successful in the face of obstacles (BDAG 2000:531; LSJ at Perseus 2020). Therefore, understood within the context of Greco-Roman status concern, the disciples are to stand their ground in their new status as disciples of the Lord and heirs to the Kingdom. They are to persist and never to give up their faith for anything else (Eph. 6:13).

The need for persistence and steadfastness in the faith would have been relevant for Luke's auditors dotted across the heartland of the Greco-Roman world. Although the identity of Lukan audience remains debatable, most scholars agree on mixed churches with a gentile majority locating them within the Mediterranean urban milieu (Creamer, Spencer & Vijoen 2014:1; Johnson 1991:22). The social demographics of the churches would have ranged from the poor to social elites like Theophilus (Lk 1:3; 6:20–26). Their unique counter-cultural values and commitments would have reduced them into minority groups within the Greco-Roman world with the identity and status ambiguities that come with being a minority group. Within this context, the pressure to conform to the ethos of the larger cultural context, which would have set them on a collision course with the values of the Christ-groups, would have been an ever present challenge. These pressures would have risen out of mere social ostracism or

persecution, which by the time of Luke's gospel had become more pronounced (Levine & Witherington 2018:9). The reality of this challenge is evident through the way Paul endlessly reminded believers to maintain their new status in Christ by, amongst other things, not conforming to the values of their old ways of life (Rm 12.2; Eph 4:17–24). The appeal to socio-cultural categories of persistence and status concern characteristic of the Greco-Roman honour and shame cultures both in the Third Gospel and in Paul's letters provided useful metaphors for the Christ-followers. It helped them to internalise the need to withstand both the lure of Greco-Roman 'paganism' and its values and the challenge of ostracism or persecution.

The steward and status concern: A discipleship paradigm

The theme of persistence and status concern that progresses from the parable of The Friend at Midnight (Lk 11:5–13) is further reflected in the characterisation of the Dishonest Steward in chapter 16:1–9. In the parable, Jesus introduces two main characters: the rich man who decides to fire his servant, and a steward on the verge of a precarious future and has to act in order to save his honour and status. For Luke's audience, the reference to the relationship between πλούσιος (rich man) and the οἰκονόμος (steward) (Lk 16:1) concretised the proximity of privilege and power, on the one hand, and powerlessness, on the other, in Greco-Roman society. The rich, who did not work but instead employed workers to generate their income, enjoyed immense leisure. As absentee property owners, they occasionally came to check the books and collect either the rent or profit from the land and go back to the city to enjoy the benefit of their wealth (cf. Lk 20:9–12). The social status of the steward remains an open question. In its original context, the meaning of the term οἰκονόμος oscillated between a slave and a civic officer (Baergen 2006:25–38) and therefore, a position of powerlessness. Aristotle mentions two types of slaves: those in a position of trust and the mere labourer (Aristotle, *Econ*. 1.1344a). Aristotle's statement suggests that in a domestic setting, the steward would have been a slave in a position of trust (cf. Van Eck 2017:179). Similarly, if a steward could be a civic officer, as Baergen alleges, it implies that they could also be a hired hand employed to manage the business portfolios of the rich.

It follows from this understanding that although stewards were generally low-born labourers, their participation in the fortunes of the affluent class enabled them to experience the rare opportunity of social mobility and the status claim that came with it. Columella's agricultural handbook catalogues the privileges of the οἰκονόμος. They had entitlement to the farm's house quarters (Columella, *Res. Rust*. 1, 6:7) and had oversight of the entire business of their master. Besides, they had legal powers to invest and accrue returns on behalf of the master (Columella, *Res Rust* 1,8.12–15). They, therefore, had the opportunity to make use of some of the proceeds of the business for their benefit (Cicero, *Ag*. *Ver*. 2.3.119). All this suggests that a steward enjoyed a lifestyle above the average labourer which in turn gave him significant influence and status within their community. It also implies that being removed from the position of a steward was a significant status shift. For the steward in the parable, the shift entailed making a delicate choice between two unwelcome options: becoming a mere digger[5] (labourer) with all the hard work and dishonour that came with it[6] or slipping into mendicancy and the shame associated with it (Lk 16:3). The steward was, however, not ready for either of the above options.

The steward's unwillingness to dig suggests that he may have been a former labourer promoted to a steward and therefore understood the physical exertion the status demanded. This understanding agrees with Columella's recommendation concerning the appointment of stewards. He argues:

> A man should be chosen who has been hardened by farm work from his infancy, one who has been tested by experience. If, however, such a person is not available, let one be put in charge out of the number of those who have slaved patiently at hard labour. (Columella, *Res Rust* 1, 8. 1–4)

If indeed the steward was once a mere labourer, his inability 'to dig' suggests that his time as a steward had significantly softened him. In addition, the sheer survival associated with being a labourer would have been repulsive to the steward.[7] The annual income of a labourer was 289 g of silver a year whilst the annual cost of maintaining a family amounted to 516.352 g of silver (Bowman & Wilson 2009:337). To bridge the income gap the labourer had to work long hours. Even then, the higher number of slaves working in different sectors of the Greco-Roman economy also made the availability of paid work difficult (Finley 1959:145–164). The above income structure meant that the labourer was always on the verge of destitution. For someone who had enjoyed the privileged status associated with the rich and high-born, the daily struggle for survival of the πένης or the shame of the πτωχός would have been an unthinkable personal tragedy.

What the steward did to preserve his present status encapsulates not only the Greco-Roman spirit of status concern but also the thrust of what Jesus intended to communicate to his disciples. As he had nothing except his master's property, of which he had been accused of squandering, the steward decided to use the same to achieve his end. From his master's debtors, he resolved to create for himself a fictive community which would act as a future safety net. Some scholars rightly think that the relatively high value of the debts, which ordinarily would have been beyond the reach of the poor, reflects trading patterns amongst the

5. The verb used for digging is σκάπτω. It is a variation of the verb πένομαι which means 'to work or toil'. This means that the labourer lived at the basic level of existence. His life was therefore far less glamorous when compared with that of the rich.

6. Cicero (*De Off.* 1.150) says this nature of work was unbecoming to a gentleman. 'Vulgar are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere manual labour, not for artistic skill' cf. Sirach 38:25–34.

7. Aristotle (*Nic. Eth.* 1122b), says πένης μὲν οὐκ ἂν εἴη μεγαλοπρεπής, 'the poor cannot be magnificent'.

rich.[8] The values of the debts also suggest that through his work the steward had been introduced to an economically well-off social class. In a rare display of generosity, he decided to reduce their debt by 50% and 20%, respectively.[9] Such acts of generosity towards fellow businessmen had significant implications for social relations and status maintenance in the Greco-Roman world. In his study of status and ethos amongst businessmen in the late republic and early empire, Verboven (2007) argues that:

> Generosity in general and euergetism, in particular, was indissolubly linked to the Roman status system. Whereas investments in durable luxury goods were a relatively safe and easy way to achieve or express status, generosity implied the irreversible loss of substantial material resources and therefore required stable and predictable institutions to optimise and guarantee the symbolic assets to be gained. (p. 5)

Verboven's reference to the importance of symbolic assets in the maintenance of status is also underscored by Cicero's relationship with the businessman M Curius of Patras. It is said that to gain Cicero's goodwill and friendship, Curius demonstrated unusual generosity to the former. When he hosted Cicero in 49 BC, he not only wrote him into his will but also went on to nurse Cicero's sick freedman Tiro. This became the beginning of a fruitful patron-client relationship. Cicero later recommended Curius to Servius Sulpicius and Auctus, two governors of Achaia.[10] Thus, it can be argued that generosity had an instrumental role in the creation of symbolic social capital. This line of thinking ties in with Van Eck's (2017:180, 181) analysis of Ptolemaic and Mediterranean practice of debt cancellation in quest for honour and the need to turn debtors into clients.

In line with Verboven's observation of Greco-Roman businessmen's social practices, the steward's action demonstrated his unwavering trust in the cultural institution of guest-friendship and reciprocity which put an obligation on those shown generosity to give back, not just in equal measure but even more.[11] In a society where family and friendship ties took precedence over community obligations (Missiou 1998:192), the steward decided to create, amongst fellow businessmen, a symbolic asset that would see him through tough times. Creating a pool of friends from such a group would have been critical to the maintenance of his status. It would ensure the maintenance of his connection amongst those who mattered in society. These friends will not only receive him in their homes (Lk 16:4) but also create the type of association that would be advantageous to the steward. It can also be observed that Jesus' depiction of steward's use of generosity in the creation and maintenance of status indicates his familiarity with the social conventions of his time.

At the heart of the steward's action was the concept of μῆτις. Held to be the absolute and most sophisticated of virtues, μῆτις was a faculty related to the ability to be clever, inventive, audacious, cunning, crafty, shrewd (*Hom. Ill*. 23.315–318; LSJ at Perseus 2020). The concept had its roots in the Homeric male virtues which prescribed that when forces of speech cannot obtain success, the Homeric male had to count on μῆτις. Its meaning is encapsulated in the Greco-Roman spirit of audacity, persistence and relentless quest for and maintenance of honour and status. For example, Nestor tells his son 'to win a horse race it takes more than just fast horses. More than anything one also needs μῆτις' (Hom. Ill.23. 315–318) (cf. Dunkle 1987). The importance of shrewdness went beyond being a male virtue. Whilst men like Odysseus were known for the cleverness, women could also display unimaginable μῆτις. When inundated by suitors from the nearby village, who demanded her hand in marriage, Penelope used her wit to buy time before she could make her decision. For 3 years, she cheats her suitors by telling them that she will marry only after she had finished weaving a death shroud for Odysseus's father Laertes, only to weave the shroud during the day and unravelling it by night (Homer *Ody*. 19.137–158). She thus saves herself from a second marriage and remains chaste until her husband's arrival back in Ithaca. A similar spirit of persistence and relentless maintenance of honour is apparent in the steward's action in the face of an impending personal tragedy.

Many commentators classify the steward's action of changing the creditors' terms of the contract as fraudulent and, therefore, dishonest. This understanding does not consider the degree of freedom that stewards possessed in negotiating business contracts on behalf of their masters. Thus, when understood within its Greco-Roman context, as a legal representative of his master, the mandate to change the terms of the contract lay within the steward's powers (cf. Columella, *Res Rust* 1,8.12–15). The steward's action can therefore be best understood not in relation to dishonesty but μῆτις. He exercised shrewdness at a critical time as was expected in his circumstance. The commendation that the steward received in verse 8 supports this understanding.[12] Schellenberg (2008:273) argues that the unexpected intrusion of the κύριος in verse 8 begs the question of whether the steward's master commends his disloyal servant, or it is Luke telling his audience that Jesus – who is routinely called κύριος throughout Luke and Acts – approved of his main character's behaviour. It is likely that the function of the term κύριος in verse 8 had a double thrust; both the steward's master and Jesus commend him. For the master, the steward's action, no matter his intentions, demonstrated both his business astuteness and a timely application of μῆτις. The Greek

8. One individual owed 900 gallons of oil whilst another owed 1000 bushels of wheat (Lk 16:5–7).

9. Trudinger (1998:99) trashes the steward's action as cosmetic generosity because even after the debt reduction the amount owed by the debtors remains gigantic. Yet when this transaction is understood from the perspective of friendship and trading patterns amongst rich businessmen, Trudinger's argument becomes significantly undermined.

10. Cicero's correspondence contains allusions to his relations with Curius (see Cicero, *Epist. ad Fam*., vii.23–26, viii. 5, 6, xiii. 7, 17, 50, xvi. 4, 5, 9, 11; *Epist. ad Attic*., vii. 2, 3, xvi. 3.).

11. The spirit of obligation is also exemplified in Luke 7:47 where the woman who is forgiven much, ἠγάπησεν πολύ, loved much.

12. Whether falsely accused or not, his dishonesty could probably have arisen out of the rumour of his squandering of his master's property (Lk 16:1), which formed the basis of his dismissal.

adverb used in verse 8, φρονίμως, has the sense of the English adverb wisely, sensibly, thoughtfully or prudently (BDAG 2000:1066; LSJ at Perseus 2020). Although the parable does not provide the outcome of the steward's business transaction with the debtors, we can deduce the basis of the commendation from modern business loan repayment arrangements. Studies in the business world demonstrate that the restructuring of loan repayment plans has a significant influence on debt recovery (see Reinhart, Reinhart & Rog 2015:43–55; Tengstam 2006:127–130). It is, therefore, probable that by reducing the debtors' repayment burden by 50% and 20%, respectively, the steward facilitated a quick recovery of his master's loans. The action would have potentially reduced the incidences of bad debt after his departure. Secondly, by acting generously on behalf of his master, he created a positive image of both himself and that of his master in the community (Landry & May 2000:287). Thus, although in his master's estimation he remained the ἀδικίας, the dishonest one, based on the rumours surrounding his dealing with his master's property, the steward's action transformed him into the ὃ φρόνιμος, (Lk 16:8), the shrewd one, the wise one. By sheer persistence, he had not only maintained but also enhanced his status before his master. More importantly, through his act of generosity he had also crafted for himself a community of friends who would potentially receive him in their homes at the end of his tenure. Like a typical Greco-Roman male, he had maintained his honour and shunned the shame of being a labourer and a mendicant.

Understood within the context of Jesus' travel narratives, particularly concerning the theme of persistence, the steward's tenacity would have had significant pedagogical significance for Luke's primary audience. It provided a model of persistence amongst Christ-followers in Luke's churches.[13] As Reed (2001:188) argues, the Greek and Hebrew words for parable are παραβολή or לָשָׁמ, respectively, which mean to place beside or compare and 'to be like'. The disciples' relationship with Jesus as the Lord, encapsulated in terms of the Kingdom of God, represented their highest honour. The same also defined their status in the Kingdom of God, both realised and eschatological. Therefore, like the steward, the disciples were to use any means at their disposal to ensure their place in the Kingdom of God. In Luke 6:20a, the destiny of the poor is not in transient wealth that can easily affect their status, but in their being part of the Kingdom. Understood within the context of Jesus' teaching on discipleship as depicted in the travel narratives (Lk 9:51–18:48), in order to maintain their Kingdom status, the disciples must adopt the persistent spirit of the dishonest steward. Such a spirit is also reflected within the broader context of Jesus' teaching across the gospel. It is demonstrable, inter alia, in his call for persistence in prayer (Lk 11:5–8), the forgiveness of each other's sins (Lk 17:1–4) and continuing in faith even in the faith of doubt (Lk 17:5). It is also found in the audacity of the widow before the unjust judge (Lk 18:1–8). Her persistence against all the odds enabled her to get justice even from the most unlikely of personalities. Therefore, as Ellis has argued, the steward is commended for turning his talent to an intelligent self-interest. He is not unjust in any special way. He is just a man, who, like all the sons of the world, gives priority to himself and his worldly security (Ellis 1973:198). Similarly, the disciples are to persist in their status as Christ-followers, a status that qualified them to be the sons of the Kingdom and all the privileges associated with it. The steward was, therefore, a model of discipleship within the Lukan churches.

13. David Flusser's comparative study of the context of Jesus' parables, vis-a-vis those told by Jewish rabbis, provides a basis for understanding the contextual nature of this parable. Flusser demonstrates that the interpretative contexts provided by the gospel tradition are probably original because in the rabbinic tradition parables were not free-floating but were more often connected to questions, incidents or situations (quoted in DeSilva 2004:339).

Conclusion

This article has argued that Greco-Roman status concern provides an alternative and plausible framework for understanding the message of the parable of the Dishonest Steward. This approach takes seriously both the literary context of the parable in which persistence as an attribute of discipleship is a recurring theme and the parable's Greco-Roman social context in which honour and its maintenance were some of the characteristic ethos. Thus, in the parable, Jesus uses the social convention of status and status concern as part of his instruction to his disciples on the importance of maintaining their present status as sons of the Kingdom. The need for perseverance in the faith would have been more significant for Luke's early Christian communities. The minority status of the early Christian movement within the larger Greco-Roman world would have exerted significant identity and status pressures on some individual Christ-followers. These pressures, which would have taken many forms – from cultural expectation, ostracism to outright persecution – would have created the potential for others to falter in their faith. The steward, therefore, becomes a model of perseverance for such Christ-followers.

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