

Should we admire the shrewd steward (Luke 16:1-9)? Moral exemplarism and Christian ethics

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Abstract

The parable of the shrewd steward (Luke 16:1–9) is notoriously difficult to interpret. We encounter a figure who, when threatened with dismissal, dishonestly erases the debts of his master's debtors. Yet, surprisingly, the master commends the steward. So, what exactly are we meant to admire in the steward? With help from Linda Zagzebski's theory of moral exemplarism, I discuss why we should—and should not—consider the steward to be morally exemplary. I also consider the place of moral exemplars within Christian ethics.

Main Text

Positive role models, or moral exemplars, are increasingly of interest to ethicists.¹ Bridging the gap between theory and practice, exemplars inspire us to live well and, in their own ways, show us how to do so.² Their stories, of course, are a staple means by which we encounter and learn from exemplars. And so, for Christian ethicists especially, the stories of exemplary figures in the Bible are of paramount importance. After all, Jesus—the ultimate exemplar—is encountered through holy writ.

Scripture, however, provides a wide array of exemplars, some more obviously exemplary than others. And one of the less obvious exemplars—if he really is an exemplar—is the shrewd steward in Luke 16, the steward who, when threatened with dismissal from his post, erases the debts of his master's debtors so that they might welcome him into their homes. Perhaps surprisingly, the master *commends* the steward, suggesting that there is something morally admirable in the steward's example.

I think there *is* something to learn from the steward and from this parable more generally. I have two things in mind. First, I think recent scholarship on moral exemplarism, particularly from the philosopher Linda Zagzebski, can help us make moral sense of the parable of the shrewd steward, thus highlighting what we might learn from this beguiling story. Second, I think that an analysis of the parable, using Zagzebski's exemplarism, can further illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of that theory, thus contributing to our theoretical understanding of moral exemplars, including their place within Christian ethics.

To speak to these points, I will proceed in three steps. First, I will analyse the parable using Zagzebski's theory of moral exemplarism; I show why the shrewd steward *should not* be considered exemplary, despite the master's commendation. Second, I will analyse the parable again using Zagzebski's theory of divine motivation, her theological complement to moral exemplarism; I show why the steward *should* be considered exemplary, in light of divine motives. Third, I will step back from the parable to consider Zagzebski's account of moral exemplarism; I ask how exemplarism might fit within Christian moral reasoning as a whole.

The Parable Analysed with Exemplarist Moral Theory

To begin, we need a basic understanding of Zagzebski's theory of moral exemplarism. Its mature form can be found in her 2017 book, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. The theory, Zagzebski claims, is a 'comprehensive ethical theory' which defines 'all central terms in moral discourse, including "virtue", "right act", "duty", and "good life", by direct reference to exemplars, or persons *like that*, where *that* is the object of admiration'.³ It has several basic features. I mention four.

1. An exemplar is a 'paradigmatically excellent person', who is most admirable in some moral regard.⁴
2. An admirable person is identified through the 'emotion of admiration', which we must ineluctably trust; though that trust can change as it is 'shaped by experience, beliefs, and the emotional responses of others'.⁵
3. Admiration 'carries the impetus to imitate' the person admired, even if merely through a general desire 'to be the kind of person who would be capable of doing' what the exemplar does well.⁶
4. The admirable features of an exemplar 'are discovered through observation', including the sort involved in reading narratives of exemplary figures.⁷

Now, why all this detail around exemplars? Because, says Zagzebski, morality is best approached by identifying good exemplars rather than defining complex terms like utility, rights, or human flourishing. What's more, she continues, exemplars 'can be used to actually make persons moral ... [via] a motivating emotion, the emotion of admiration'.⁸ These two points hold weight because 'imitation [of admirable figures] is the basic way in which humans and other animals learn'.⁹

Turning, then, to the parable of the shrewd steward, we ask whether the steward should elicit our admiration. His master commends him, which suggests that the steward has some

admirable moral trait, one that—by Zagzebski’s lights—should carry with it an ‘impetus to imitate’.¹⁰ Is the master right in his commendation? What exactly should we imitate?

To investigate the steward’s admirable features, let us read through parable, from verse 1 to 9.¹¹ This gives just enough narrative for our initial analysis.

¹[Jesus] also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. ²And he called him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship [*oikonomia*] for you can no longer be steward”.

³And the steward said to himself, “What shall I do, since my master [*kyrios*] is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship”.

⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, “How much do you owe my master?” ⁶He said, “A hundred measures of oil”. And he said to him, “Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty”. ⁷Then he said to another, “And how much do you owe?” He said, “A hundred measures of wheat”. He said to him, “Take your bill, and write eighty”.

⁸The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness [*phronimos*]; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations ...’

Here, we encounter a figure, the steward, who, in the estimation of the master, is to be commended for acting shrewdly (*phronimos*) in the face of a personally challenging situation.¹² Given the master’s commendation, we, the readers, are presented with an exemplar to admire. But, faced with a compromised situation—with wasted goods, cooked books, and overall dishonesty—what exactly are we meant to admire? To answer this question, we look again to Zagzebski for interpretive guidance.

One thing we might admire are the steward’s *shrewd actions*. But, according to Zagzebski, reaching this conclusion would be a mistake. Specifically, she notes, there are dangers in directly referring to the actions of an exemplar to define what a ‘right action’ could be. For instance, assuming an exemplar does something morally praiseworthy, the action may be a temptation for a potential imitator who (i) may lack the requisite skill to do it, or (ii) may do the action in the wrong spirit.¹³ As for the steward’s actions (of waste and deceit), it is difficult (though not impossible) to isolate their morally praiseworthy dimensions. This makes them all the harder to use for moral guidance.

Failing actions, we turn instead to the steward's *motivations*—these being ‘emotional states’ like love and compassion.¹⁴ And, indeed, according to Zagzebski, an exemplar's motivations are key: with reference to them, we are given ‘directions’ to find out what moral terms—such as ‘virtue’, ‘good end’, ‘virtuous act’, and a ‘desirable life’—might mean.¹⁵ Moral goodness flows from the goodness of an exemplar's motivations, she claims.¹⁶ It is through the subjective motivations of an exemplar that we discover the objectivity of the moral world.¹⁷

Turning again to the shrewd steward, we apply this theoretical insight to the text. Doing so, however, does not paint the steward in a better light than before, as the steward's motives—in addition to his actions—also appear morally suspect. Indeed, we see that he acts to improve his situation at the expense of another; and he acts through dishonest means, drawing others into his dishonesty. These ‘shrewd’ actions point to motivations of sheer self-interest, manipulation, and greed. If motivations are morally determinate as Zagzebski suggests, then the steward *should not* be a moral exemplar. His master—and we, the readers—would be wrong to commend him.

Now the analysis just given may sound a bit rash as well as incomplete. After all, the steward features somewhat positively in a biblical parable and so must have redeeming qualities. Moreover, the parable drives home a message about securing one's eternal dwellings and so presumably features a good motivation somewhere. These are significant points to explore. However, they are best appreciated not within Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory (which is secular in nature) but rather through her theory of divine motivation, her theological complement to exemplarism. Let us reapproach the parable through this alternative lens.

The Parable Analysed with Divine Motivation Theory

Like moral exemplarism, Zagzebski's theory of divine motivation is an ethical theory that grounds moral reasoning in our *a posteriori* judgement, or observations, of exemplars. But in this version, God—in the person of Jesus Christ—features as the central exemplary figure. Moreover, it is Christ's motivations, and those of the imitators of Christ (i.e., the saints), that determine what moral goodness *is* in the real world.¹⁸ Simply put, then, divine motivation theory holds that all moral properties (of persons, actions, outcomes, states of affairs, etc.) are defined with reference to divine motives.¹⁹ And so, a state of affairs is said to be compassionate when divine motives which constitute compassion aim to bring about that state of affairs.²⁰

This is divine motivation theory in a nutshell; and while there is more to say about it (for example, concerning its differences with divine command theory²¹), let us move to our second analysis of Luke 16:1–9.

In this analysis, we seek to identify and to investigate the divine motivations at work in the narrative. To do this, we look for imitators of Christ, or Christ-like exemplars. And, in the text, we find at least two candidates: first, the steward, who presumably displays divine motives through his shrewdness; and, second, the master or *kyrios*, a term often used in Luke to refer to Christ: see, for example, Luke 7:13; 10:39, 41.²² What's more, we also note that Christ himself is present in the narrative, serving as the parable-teller. We include him as a third, and indeed the prime, exemplar.

Given this cast of characters, what divine motives might there be? In brief, I suggest that Christ, through the master and steward, displays motives pertaining to just economics [*oikonomia*]. We arrive at this conclusion through interdisciplinary observations.

For one, in their explorations of the social and economic context of the parable, biblical commentators highlight structures of ownership (from ancient forms of capitalism to household slavery) that create tensions (indeed, structural injustices) between the master and manager, and between the master and the master's debtors.²³ Therefore, assuming only goodness in divine motivation (an insight from philosophical theology), we may say that the master's commendation of the steward evinces divine motives related to the easing of economic injustice. Christ, if not the master himself, is motivated to rectify an unjust situation, wherein debtors and employees are subject to harsh economic conditions.

Alternatively, we might shift our attention back to the steward, seeing him in a more positive light than before. In being commended, the steward may also be seen as fulfilling divine motives: he acts shrewdly amidst an unjust situation; he helps ease the economic compulsion that he and the master's debtors experience; his seemingly dishonest actions are, by divine motives, morally justified.

That the teller of the parable, Christ himself, has just motives is suggested at the parable's end, which reads: 'make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations' (verse 9). In other words, earthly riches will perish. So, we, the readers, should share them with others, especially those experiencing acute economic compulsion. By doing so, we will be welcomed in heaven. We will fulfil Christ's just motives.

Now, identifying the divine motivation in this way does two things. Most obviously, it aligns the parable with Luke's other teachings on money, for example, Luke 15: 11–31 (concerning, in part, the wastefulness of the lost son), Luke 16:19–31 (concerning the rich man and Lazarus) and, more generally, Luke 16 as a whole (concerning the wise and faithful use of material resources).²⁴

But, most importantly, defining the divine motivation in this way has the additional benefit of making sense of the master's and steward's narrative action. As discussed earlier, the steward is no straightforward exemplar: our first analysis shows him to be shrewd but dishonest; his motivations appear merely self-interested. Yet, when considering the commendation of the master—who, like God, appears to have full knowledge and agency over the entire situation—we can view the steward as somehow participating, if unwittingly, in God's just motives. Through his shrewd and self-interested actions, he fulfils a divine motivation. And this overall situation—which involves what may seem to be moral wrongs, such as a dishonest handling of accounts—is ultimately redeemed, since it is divine motivation that defines the situation's moral properties.

Of course, we could also view the steward in an alternative way (as subverting an unjust situation) and thus see the master, and not the steward, as chiefly responsible for the moral wrongs involved. But even so, the steward's example remains praiseworthy not because of his own actions and intentions (which, on a plain reading of the text, still possess elements of moral imperfection) but because of a direct reference to divine motivation.

And so, by viewing the steward in the wider context of divine justice, we see him as more convincingly admirable than before. And since he too is less than perfect, the steward appears relatable: we, the readers, see ourselves in him—in his shrewd actions or in his dire straits. And we might even aspire to one-up him, as we can attempt (through God's grace, and the benefit of steward's example) to knowingly conform our own imperfect motivations with the divine motive for just economics.

Moral Exemplarism or Moral Exemplars?

At last, with guidance from Zagzebski, I have given what I think is a satisfying, albeit tentative, exemplarist interpretation of Luke 16:1–9.²⁵ The steward should be seen as a moral exemplar *not* because of his own motives (a conclusion suggested under a secular moral exemplarism alone),

but because of the just motives of God (a conclusion reached through divine motivation theory).²⁶

My aim in this paper, of course, was not merely to provide a satisfactory interpretation of the parable, since similar interpretations have already been given—though almost certainly through different means.²⁷ My further aim, then, involves seeing how an exemplarist analysis of this parable might speak to the strengths and limits of Zagzebski's account of moral exemplarism and to the place of exemplars within Christian moral reasoning. Two brief reflections will suffice.

First, Zagzebski refers to moral exemplarism (in its secular and theological versions) as a 'comprehensive ethical theory',²⁸ one grounded solely in the emotion of admiration: 'the theory I propose', she writes 'is foundational in structure. By that I mean that the entire theory is constructed out of a single point of origin'.²⁹ In other words, there is nothing beyond admiration and its objects (i.e., human or divine motives) that does the heavy work of determining moral properties.³⁰ But this claim—if I understand it correctly—must be false. For one, our analyses above relied upon interdisciplinary insights to reason through the steward's and master's motivations. An emotion may have begun this process, but the process certainly did not end there. Non-exemplarist standards concerning justice in economics, for example, played a foundational role.

What's more, Zagzebski herself stresses that we should trust our emotion of admiration *only* when it has withstood rational reflection.³¹ This suggests that moral exemplarism does not rely on emotions alone and that the rational faculties feature fundamentally in the theory's method.³² If this is correct, then why not say that moral exemplarism is grounded in emotion (specifically admiration) *as well as* reason (involving practical and theoretical reasons of many kinds)? Why claim a unitary foundation?

Second, if moral exemplarism entails scriptural exegesis, practical reasoning over goods, reflection upon divine nature and the like, then perhaps moral exemplarism is not a standalone theory but, in reality, a form of Christian moral reasoning that happens to begin from an emotive starting point. Admiration, then, would not be the sole foundation of moral reasoning. It would be but a compelling point of departure (though there could be *other* compelling points from which to begin).

This modest reformulation seems right on several counts. It aligns with the full breadth of Zagzebski's methodology, making explicit and foundational its rational elements.³³ It continues to anchor Christian ethics in the narratives of exemplars, especially the story of

Christ.³⁴ And it remains consonant with how ethics *feels*, highlighting the place of emotion, specifically admiration, within a Christian ethical worldview.³⁵ Indeed, among the many things that we can learn from the parable of the shrewd steward is the fact that admiration—when faced with enigmatic exemplars—requires plentiful reflection.

- 1 Linda Zagzebski, 'Moral Exemplars in Theory and Practice', *Theory and Research in Education* 11, no. 2 (2013): 193–206; Adam M. Willows, 'Stories and the Development of Virtue', *Ethics and Education* 12, no. 3 (2017): 337–50; Ian James Kidd, 'Admiration, Attraction and the Aesthetics of Exemplarity', *Journal of Moral Education* 48, no. 3 (2019): 369–80; Natasza Szutta, 'Exemplarist Moral Theory – Some Pros and Cons', *Journal of Moral Education* 48, no. 3 (2019): 280–90; Koji Tachibana, 'Nonadmirable Moral Exemplars and Virtue Development', *Journal of Moral Education* 48, no. 3 (2019): 346–57.
- 2 Linda Zagzebski, 'Divine Motivation Theory and Exemplarism', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8, no. 3 (2016): 109–21.
- 3 Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3, italics in original.
- 4 Zagzebski, 20.
- 5 Zagzebski, 20; Zagzebski, 'Divine Motivation Theory and Exemplarism', 119.
- 6 Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 20.
- 7 Zagzebski, 20.
- 8 Zagzebski, 3.
- 9 Linda Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 187.
- 10 Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 20.
- 11 Luke 16:1–9 (Revised Standard Version).
- 12 The adjective *phronimōs* is used positively in other parables and images, for example, in Matthew 10:16, which reads, 'Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise [*phronimōs*] as serpents and innocent as doves'. It has been argued, however, that the Aramaic behind *phronimōs* in Luke 16:8 was intended to have negative connotations and thus should be interpreted as a term used by the imperfect master and not by Christ, the teller of the parable. See Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 440. We can reconcile the negative interpretation of *phronimōs* with the positive message of the parable if we look to the divine motives latent in the text: I argue this point through use of Zagzebski's theory of divine motivation.
- 13 Zagzebski, 'Divine Motivation Theory and Exemplarism', 115.
- 14 Zagzebski, 109.
- 15 Zagzebski, 114.
- 16 Zagzebski, 116.
- 17 Patrick Madigan, 'Divine Motivation Theory. By Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski', *Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 1 (2007): 161; Zagzebski, 'Divine Motivation Theory and Exemplarism', 120.
- 18 Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, 213; Zagzebski, 'Divine Motivation Theory and Exemplarism', 111.
- 19 Zagzebski, 'Divine Motivation Theory and Exemplarism', 109.
- 20 Zagzebski, 110.
- 21 Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, 258ff.
- 22 Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:440.
- 23 Jennifer A Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 324–25; Karl Allen Kuhn, *The Kingdom According to Luke and Acts: A Social, Literary, and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 233–40.
- 24 Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, 320–39.
- 25 By Zagzebski's lights, all exemplarist analyses will be tentative since they are subject to change through further observation and through reflection upon exemplars with others.

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- 26 Zagzebski, 'Divine Motivation Theory and Exemplarism', 112–13.
- 27 For example, see Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, 324–25; Kuhn, *The Kingdom According to Luke and Acts: A Social, Literary, and Theological Introduction*, 233–40.
- 28 Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 3.
- 29 Zagzebski, 9.
- 30 Zagzebski, 14–20.
- 31 Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, 52; Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 44–50.
- 32 Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 15.
- 33 Zagzebski, 45.
- 34 Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory*, chap. 6.
- 35 Zagzebski, chap. 2.