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ENTRUSTED AUTHORITY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF LUKE 12:42–48 AND ITS REFINEMENT OF STEWARD LEADERSHIP THEORY

Matthew Hattabaugh

Steward leadership has gained increasing attention in contemporary leadership studies because it frames authority as a trust exercised for the good of others rather than as a possession used for personal gain. At the same time, the literature remains conceptually uneven in its treatment of entrusted authority, accountability, and human flourishing. In this study, the author applies Osborne's (2006) hermeneutical principles for interpreting parables to Luke 12:42–48 to address the following research question: How does an analysis of Luke 12:42–48 refine steward leadership theory's understanding of entrusted authority, accountability, and human flourishing? The analysis indicates that the parable presents authority as delegated rather than owned, accountability as morally evaluative and proportionate, and flourishing as faithful provision for others rather than leader-centered success. The setting, structure, earthly details, and theological thrust of the parable converge on a coherent model of steward leadership in which legitimacy is measured by how entrusted power is exercised on behalf of dependents under the expectation of judgment. In that respect, Luke 12:42–48 does more than illustrate stewardship. The findings refine steward leadership theory by clarifying the purpose of authority, the standards by which stewardship is judged, and the ethical content of flourishing.

Keywords: delegated trust, evaluative judgment, faithful provision, kingdom ethics, stakeholder welfare

Steward leadership has emerged as a significant framework in contemporary leadership studies because it treats authority as a trust exercised for the good of others rather than as a possession used for personal gain. Recent scholarship has connected steward leadership to governance, stakeholder responsibility, moral accountability, and long-term well-being, which makes the theory especially relevant to discussions of

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human flourishing (Caldwell et al., 2008; Karns, 2011; Lawler, 2014; Tolbert, 2023). At the same time, the literature remains conceptually uneven in several important respects. Research has not consistently clarified whether authority in steward leadership is best understood as delegated trust, fiduciary obligation, organizational office, or some combination of these categories (Hernandez, 2008; Tolbert, 2023). The literature also leaves unresolved how accountability should be defined, especially whether it is primarily procedural, relational, moral, or evaluative (Keay, 2017; Torrance, 2023). A similar lack of precision surrounds flourishing. Although steward leadership is often associated with trust, sustainability, stakeholder welfare, and organizational health, the literature has not yet provided a sufficiently textured account of whose flourishing is prioritized and what moral content that flourishing includes (Karns, 2011; Till et al., 2019; Torrance, 2023). These unresolved issues establish the need for a more textually grounded study.

Luke 12:42–48 provides a particularly suitable pericope for addressing these gaps because it gathers in one parabolic unit the three categories that remain underdefined in steward leadership scholarship: delegated authority, evaluative accountability, and the welfare of those under a leader's care. Unlike broader stewardship texts that emphasize responsibility in general terms, Luke 12:42–48 concentrates authority, provision, abuse of power, delayed return, and judgment within a single and coherent discourse setting. For that reason, the passage offers an especially focused basis for refining steward leadership theory. Lukan scholarship has shown that this text should not be reduced to a generalized lesson in prudence. Rather, it belongs to a world of vigilance, accountability, and evaluative reckoning in which authority is exercised under the expectation of the master's return (Bauckham, 1983; Van Aarde, 1988). Other studies have further shown that the steward language in Luke carries concrete social and ethical force. The passage turns on the management of people and resources, the timing of provision, and the misuse of delegated authority for violence and self-indulgence (Howes, 2015; Sellew, 1992; Tooley, 1966). Read in this way, Luke 12:42–48 presents more than a religious illustration of prudent leadership. The passage offers a theologically charged account of authority as entrusted custody rather than autonomous possession.

The passage is also especially important for questions of flourishing. Work on Luke's ethics of wealth, peace, and provision has argued that stewardship in Luke cannot be separated from justice, communal well-being, and the welfare of vulnerable persons (Hays, 2012; Miller, 2014; Newberry, 2025). The faithful steward is commended not for personal security or administrative success alone, but for giving others their food allowance at the proper time (Luke 12:42). By contrast, the abusive steward converts entrusted authority into self-serving control and thereby turns leadership into harm. The passage therefore raises a significant theoretical question: if flourishing in a biblical stewardship framework is measured by faithful provision, just use of power, and accountability before the master, how should that shape contemporary steward leadership theory? For the purposes of this study, human flourishing refers to the condition in which persons under a leader's care receive faithful provision, protection from the abuse of power, and the ordered conditions necessary for their well-being before God. This working definition draws together the parable's own emphasis on timely provision (Luke 12:42) with the broader Lukan association of stewardship, justice,

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and communal welfare (Miller, 2014; Newberry, 2025) and with recent scholarship arguing that accountability itself grounds rather than threatens flourishing (Torrance, 2023). Flourishing, so defined, is neither leader wellness nor organizational performance, though it may include effects on both. It is the measurable welfare of those most dependent on how entrusted authority is exercised. The remainder of the article employs this definition when assessing how Luke 12:42–48 refines steward leadership theory.

In this study, the author applies Osborne's (2006) hermeneutical principles for interpreting parables to Luke 12:42–48 to address the following research question: How does an analysis of Luke 12:42–48 refine steward leadership theory's understanding of entrusted authority, accountability, and human flourishing? The analysis argues that the parable offers a theologically grounded account of stewardship that clarifies how authority is held, how leaders are judged, and how the good of others should be measured under entrusted responsibility.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature relevant to this study falls into two closely related categories. The first category concerns contemporary steward leadership scholarship, especially its treatment of authority, accountability, and flourishing. The second category concerns biblical and exegetical scholarship on Luke 12:42–48 and its wider Lukan context, particularly where that scholarship clarifies stewardship, provision, judgment, and entrusted responsibility. Reviewing these two bodies of literature together makes it possible to identify the conceptual gaps in steward leadership theory and the interpretive resources Luke 12:42–48 offers for refining them.

Steward Leadership Scholarship

Steward leadership literature has developed around the claim that leadership involves the responsible exercise of entrusted authority for the good of others rather than the assertion of ownership, privilege, or self-protective control. Contemporary studies commonly associate the theory with trusteeship, stakeholder care, governance responsibility, and long-term obligation (Caldwell et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; Lawler, 2014; Tolbert, 2023). This stream of research has been especially valuable in resisting leadership models that equate authority with possession and in reframing leadership as answerable stewardship directed toward communities, institutions, and shared goods. Karns (2011) extended that conversation by linking stewardship to human flourishing in business ethics, while Till et al. (2019) connected stewardship to justice and the common good rather than to financial maximization alone. Taken together, this literature establishes steward leadership as a serious moral alternative to leader-centered and purely instrumental theories of leadership.

At the same time, the research base remains underdefined in several important respects. The first concerns the status of authority itself. Steward leadership scholarship regularly assumes that authority should be exercised responsibly, but it does not always specify whether authority in the theory is best understood as delegated trust, fiduciary office, governance role, psychological ownership transformed by moral obligation, or some integrated combination of these categories (Hernandez, 2008; Tolbert, 2023).

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Lawler (2014) described stewardship in developmental and maturational terms, while Hernandez (2008) analyzed the movement from agency to stewardship through psychological and structural factors. Those contributions are useful, yet the literature still lacks a stable account of how entrusted authority differs conceptually from authority merely moderated by ethical concern. That gap matters because steward leadership claims distinctiveness not simply by commending moral behavior, but by offering a particular understanding of authority as responsibility held on behalf of others. This lack of precision in the status of authority also affects the theory's treatment of accountability, since the standards by which leaders are judged depend in part on how entrusted responsibility is understood in the first place.

A second unresolved issue grew out of this ambiguity surrounding authority and concerned accountability and its relation to flourishing. Steward leadership research consistently values responsibility and trustworthiness, yet the forms and standards of accountability are not uniformly clarified. In some studies, accountability appears largely procedural and governance-related, tied to oversight structures and fiduciary monitoring (Keay, 2017; Tolbert, 2023). In others, it is treated primarily as relational trust, ethical obligation, or fidelity to mission and stakeholders (Caldwell et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008). Torrance (2023) sharpened this problem by treating accountability as a theological category bound to human flourishing, thereby suggesting that accountability cannot be reduced to technical compliance alone. Still, the contemporary literature has not yet fully integrated procedural, relational, moral, and evaluative accountability into a coherent steward-leadership framework. As a result, the standards by which stewardship succeeds or fails often remain thinner than the theory's moral aspirations require. These unresolved questions about authority and accountability also shape the literature's treatment of flourishing, because the meaning of leadership's "good" cannot be separated from the way power is held and the standards by which its use is evaluated.

A third unresolved issue concerns the meaning of flourishing within this larger framework of entrusted authority and accountability. Steward leadership scholarship frequently associates stewardship with trust, organizational health, sustainability, and stakeholder well-being (Caldwell et al., 2008; Karns, 2011; Lawler, 2014; Till et al., 2019). These emphases are important, but they do not yet amount to a sufficiently textured account of flourishing. The literature has not consistently clarified whether flourishing refers primarily to leader development, organizational effectiveness, stakeholder welfare, societal justice, or some integrated moral vision that orders these concerns. Till et al. (2019) moved the discussion toward justice and broader social good, while Karns (2011) treated flourishing as a central moral aim of stewardship in business. Even so, the category often remains elastic. Without greater conceptual precision, flourishing can function as a positively charged but insufficiently bounded term, one capable of absorbing multiple outcomes without clearly specifying whose good is being served and by what standards that good should be judged.

Biblical and Exegetical Scholarship on Luke 12:42–48

The biblical literature on Luke 12:42–48 provides an especially promising context for addressing these gaps. Bauckham (1983) situated the passage within the Synoptic Parousia tradition — *Parousia* (παρουσία) denoting the "coming" or "arrival" of Christ at

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His return — where delayed return intensifies present ethical seriousness. Van Aarde (1988) showed that Luke's narrative point of view places readers within a world of vigilance, evaluative readiness, and responsibility. Howes (2015) illuminated the household and slavery background that informs the steward's role and clarified the practical force of delegated authority within the parable's social world. That background helps explain why provision for dependents, rather than control or self-indulgence, stands at the center of the steward's task. The term οἰκονόμος designates the "manager of a household or estate," a steward entrusted with administering the property and affairs of another (Bauer et al., 2000, p. 698). The term's ecclesial significance did not end with the New Testament era; οἰκονόμος survives to the present as an ecclesiastical rank within the Orthodox Church, where it historically designated the cleric responsible for managing ecclesiastical property under the bishop's supervision (Order of Saint Andrew the Apostle, 2024). Tooley (1966) clarified the significance of οἰκονόμος language for stewardship, and Sellew (1992) demonstrated how interior speech functions in Lukan parables to expose moral orientation, which is particularly relevant to the steward who says in his heart that the master delays. These studies collectively indicate that Luke 12:42–48 cannot be reduced to prudent administration in the abstract. The passage addresses delegated authority, treatment of dependents, abuse of power, and evaluative judgment within a tightly integrated narrative unit.

Lukan theological studies further suggest that this passage can sharpen steward leadership's account of flourishing. Miller (2014) located Luke's wealth and reversal ethics within questions of provision and justice for vulnerable persons. Newberry (2025) connected Lukan economic practices to peace, just relations, and communal well-being. Hays (2012) argued that Luke 12:35–13:9 should be read as a coherent discourse in which eschatological warning presses toward right use of possessions and care for others. These studies move the discussion of stewardship beyond efficient control or moralized administration. They suggest that flourishing in Luke is tied to faithful provision, ethical use of resources, and the welfare of those most exposed to a leader's misuse of power. That line of interpretation is especially important because it provides biblical content for a category that remains comparatively diffuse in contemporary steward leadership research.

Taken together, these unresolved issues establish the need for a more textually grounded study. Luke 12:42–48 provides a particularly suitable pericope because it gathers delegated authority, provision for dependents, abuse of power, delayed return, and moral judgment within a single parabolic unit. The contemporary literature has identified stewardship as trusteeship, accountability, and responsibility for others, but important categories remain underdefined, especially the status of authority, the standards of accountability, and the moral content of flourishing (Caldwell et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; Keay, 2017; Tolbert, 2023; Torrance, 2023). The Lukan literature suggests that these categories converge in the figure of the steward who is answerable for provision, abuse, and faithfulness under the authority of the master (Bauckham, 1983; Hays, 2012; Van Aarde, 1988). For that reason, this study places steward leadership in dialogue with Luke 12:42–48 to refine the theory through a more textually grounded account of leadership responsibility.

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METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Luke 12:42–48 is treated in this study as a parable within Lukan narrative discourse. Accordingly, the author applies Osborne’s (2006) hermeneutical principles for interpreting parables while remaining attentive to the Gospel setting in which the parable is embedded. Osborne (2006) argued that interpretation must allow the text itself to control the process and that the most adequate approach to parables blends historical and literary interests rather than privileging one at the expense of the other (p. 232). He also maintained that parables must remain parables in interpretation, because their force is best discerned when read within their first-century background and Gospel context rather than reduced to either subjective allegorizing or abstract moralizing (pp. 232–233). The passage is read as a parable whose setting, structure, imagery, and theological thrust together disclose its meaning.

Although Luke 12:42–48 is closely linked to Luke 12:35–41, the text itself indicates that verses 42–48 form a distinct primary unit. Verses 35–40 present a general call to readiness, but verse 41 marks a transition when Peter asks, “Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?” (*New American Standard Bible*, 1995, Luke 12:41). Jesus then answered not with a direct explanation of verses 35–40, but with a new parabolic formulation: “Who then is the faithful and sensible steward…?” (Luke 12:42). That shift narrows the focus from readiness in general to entrusted authority, provision, abuse, and judgment. The internal movement of verses 42–48, from faithful stewardship to corrupt stewardship to proportional accountability, gives the passage a coherent structure and thematic center of its own. Thus, verses 35–41 remain the immediate setting, but Luke 12:42–48 stands as a discrete parabolic unit and may properly function as the primary pericope for this study.

First, the study considers the parable's setting because Osborne (2006) argued that both the immediate literary context and the intended audience significantly shape a parable's thrust (p. 233). In Luke 12:42–48, this includes the delayed-return context, Peter’s question in Luke 12:41, and the broader discourse on readiness and accountability. Second, the study examines the structure of the parable, since Osborne (2006) emphasized that interpreters should trace major divisions, shifts in action, patterns of contrast, and the turning point that reveals the story’s thrust (pp. 233–234). Third, the study uncovers the background of the earthly details, because Osborne held that the historical and social realities behind the steward, the household, provision, abuse, and judgment are necessary for understanding the force of the comparison (p. 234). Fourth, the analysis identifies the main points of the parable since Osborne (2006) rejected uncontrolled allegorizing while also warning against flattening the story into a single vague moral lesson (pp. 232–233). Fifth, the study relates those findings to Luke’s theological presentation of stewardship, readiness, judgment, and provision, because Osborne (2006) argued that the parables must be read in light of Jesus’ ministry and the Evangelist’s contextual shaping of the material (p. 233). Finally, the study concludes with contextualization, since Osborne’s (2006) interpretive model assumes that the meaning of the parable must be understood before its contemporary significance can be responsibly drawn out (pp. 232–233).

Not every feature of the parable yielded the same degree of distinct leadership insight. Even so, the study considered the major elements identified by Osborne (2006) so that interpretation would not be narrowed prematurely to those features most

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obviously related to leadership theory. The Results section therefore presents in full the elements that yielded the clearest substantive contribution to the analysis of entrusted authority, accountability, and flourishing. The goal is not to impose steward leadership theory onto Luke 12:42–48, but to allow the parable itself to disclose its understanding of delegated authority, evaluative accountability, and faithful provision before those findings are placed in critical dialogue with contemporary steward leadership scholarship.

RESULTS

Luke 12:42–48 presents entrusted authority, accountability, and flourishing through its setting, structure, earthly details, and theological force. Applying Osborne's (2006) hermeneutical principles enables identification of how the steward's role, the household setting, the master's delayed return, and the logic of judgment shape the passage's leadership implications (pp. 233–234). The analysis, therefore, focuses on the features of the parable that most directly clarify leadership responsibility under entrusted authority.

Setting of the Parable

Osborne (2006) argued that the setting of a parable is crucial because the immediate literary context and the audience addressed often determine the thrust of the story (p. 233). In Luke 12:42–48, the immediate setting includes Jesus' discourse on readiness and watchfulness and, more specifically, Peter's question in Luke 12:41, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" That question narrows the interpretive focus. The issue is no longer readiness in the abstract, but readiness as it bears on those who exercise responsibility over others. The parable therefore emerges within a context already charged with questions of delegated duty, privilege, and accountability.

Van Aarde (1988) showed that Luke's point of view places readers within a narrative world of vigilance, responsibility, and evaluative readiness. Bauckham (1983) likewise situated this material within the Synoptic *Parousia* tradition, in which delayed return intensifies present ethical seriousness rather than reducing it. The setting of the parable therefore yields an important leadership implication. Luke 12:42–48 does not address leadership as possession or status. It addresses leadership exercised in the interval between commission and reckoning. The steward stands under the possibility of the master's return, and that expectation defines the moral seriousness of the office.

Structure of the Parable

Osborne (2006) emphasized that interpreters must trace the structure of a parable to identify its movement, contrasts, and turning points (pp. 233–234). The structure of Luke 12:42–48 turns on a contrast between two patterns of stewardship. The first steward is identified as "faithful and sensible" and is commended because he gives the household its food allowance at the proper time (Luke 12:42). The second steward says in his heart that the master delays, then beats the servants and indulges

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himself. The parable concludes with judgment that is differentiated according to knowledge and responsibility.

This structural contrast carries the interpretive weight of the passage. The story does not contrast stewardship with the absence of stewardship, but faithful stewardship with corrupt stewardship. Howes (2015) argued that provision stands at the center of the faithful steward tradition, and that observation helps clarify the structural force of the opening image. The steward's defining act is not symbolic leadership but timely provision for others. The turning point of the parable occurs when delay is interpreted not as continued obligation but as opportunity for abuse. Structure therefore yields a second leadership implication: entrusted authority is evaluated by what it produces in the lives of dependents when external oversight appears absent.

Background of the Earthly Details

Osborne (2006) argued that the earthly details of a parable must be illuminated by their historical and social background if the force of the comparison is to be understood accurately (p. 234). In Luke 12:42–48, the key earthly details include the steward, the household, the distribution of food, the beating of servants, the master's delayed return, and the differentiated punishments that follow. These are not decorative features. They are the social material through which the parable communicates its theological claims.

Tooley (1966) clarified that οἰκονόμος carries concrete administrative force and refers to real stewardship responsibilities rather than generalized moral disposition. Howes (2015) further illuminated the steward's role by locating it within household structures marked by delegated authority, social hierarchy, and answerability. These background features help explain why the steward's actions in the parable carry such ethical gravity. The steward exercises real authority over persons and resources, but that authority remains derivative. He manages what belongs to another and administers it on behalf of others. The detail about giving food "at the proper time" indicates that stewardship involves ordered provision, not simply general goodwill. By contrast, the abusive steward converts delegated authority into violence and self-indulgence. The background of the earthly details therefore yields a third leadership implication: stewardship concerns the custodial administration of people and resources under authority that remain borrowed, not owned.

Main Points of the Parable

Osborne (2006) rejected both uncontrolled allegorizing and the flattening of parables into a single vague moral lesson. Instead, he argued that interpreters should identify the major points generated by the structure and rhetorical force of the story (pp. 232–233). Luke 12:42–48 yields three main points relevant to leadership. First, authority is entrusted rather than possessed. The steward's role exists entirely within the authority and will of the master. Second, accountability is morally evaluative and proportionate. The steward is judged according to what he knew and how he used what had been entrusted to him. Third, flourishing is measured by faithful provision for others rather than by the steward's private advantage or apparent security.

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These points arise from the central contrasts of the parable itself. The faithful steward provides for the household. The abusive steward exploits the household for himself. The one is commended and entrusted with more responsibility. The other is judged. Sellew (1992) is helpful at this point because his analysis of interior speech in Luke's parables shows how inner reasoning exposes moral orientation. The statement, "My master will be a long time in coming," reveals the decisive corruption in the steward: he interprets delay as release from accountability. The main points of the parable therefore converge on a clear leadership logic. Entrusted authority remains answerable, and its legitimacy is measured by whether those under care are served or harmed.

Relation to Luke's Theological Presentation

Osborne (2006) argued that parables must be read in relation to Jesus' ministry and the Evangelist's contextual shaping of the material (p. 233). In Luke 12:42–48, the theological force of the parable fits Luke's broader concern with stewardship, wealth, provision, justice, and readiness. The parable does not present authority as neutral administrative capacity. It presents authority as a trust whose moral quality is revealed by provision, violence, indulgence, and judgment.

Hays (2012) argued that Luke 12:35–13:9 should be read as a coherent discourse in which eschatological warning presses toward right use of possessions and care for others. Miller (2014) likewise located Luke's stewardship theology within questions of wealth, provision, and justice for vulnerable persons. Newberry (2025) connected Lukan economic practice to peace, just relations, and communal well-being. Read in that broader theological setting, the parable's concern with food distribution is not incidental. It reflects Luke's wider insistence that faithfulness before God includes concrete responsibility for the welfare of others. Theologically, then, Luke 12:42–48 joins authority and accountability to the welfare of dependents. At the level of the parable itself, flourishing is not defined by the steward's security, visibility, or success, but by whether the household is rightly ordered through faithful provision and right use of entrusted power. It is defined by whether entrusted power is used to maintain the household's welfare under the master's will.

Contextualization

Osborne's approach assumes that interpretation must move from meaning to responsible contemporary significance (Osborne, 2006, pp. 232–233). In Luke 12:42–48, the contextual force of the parable lies in its challenge to any model of leadership that treats authority as personal entitlement. The passage remains directly relevant wherever leaders control resources, make decisions affecting others, and function within conditions of limited oversight or delayed accountability.

Several implications follow from the results above. First, the parable defines authority as entrusted rather than owned. Second, it presents accountability as moral and proportionate rather than merely procedural. Third, it measures leadership by faithful provision for others rather than by the preservation of leader privilege. Fourth, it suggests that flourishing includes the welfare of those under a leader's care, especially as that welfare is shaped by the just use of resources and power. These implications speak directly to church, nonprofit, educational, and organizational settings in which

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leadership can drift toward managerial autonomy, self-indulgence, or exploitative control. Luke 12:42–48 challenges such patterns by presenting stewardship as accountable custody exercised for the good of others.

These implications become concrete when leaders translate the parable's central image into organizational practice. The steward's task of giving the household its food allowance at the proper time (Luke 12:42) corresponds in contemporary settings to the timely and equitable distribution of whatever resources sustain those under a leader's care. In a congregation, this includes sound teaching, pastoral attention, and transparent administration of finances given in trust. In a nonprofit, it includes directing donor resources toward beneficiaries rather than institutional comfort. In a university or business, it includes fair compensation, honest communication, and the developmental investment that employees and students need to thrive. Leaders may assess their own provision by asking the questions the parable implies: whether those dependent on their administration receive what they need, whether they receive it when they need it, and whether any portion of the household languishes while the steward prospers. Provision at the proper time is therefore measurable, not sentimental. Delayed salaries, deferred maintenance of people, and hoarded information all constitute modern forms of the withheld food allowance.

Evaluative accountability likewise takes institutional form. If accountability in Luke 12:42–48 is moral, evaluative, and proportionate, then contemporary structures of oversight must examine conduct and consequences, not merely compliance (Caldwell et al., 2008; Keay, 2017). A church board practicing evaluative accountability reviews not only budgets but the treatment of staff and volunteers under the leader's authority. A nonprofit exercises it when program outcomes for beneficiaries, rather than fundraising totals alone, determine whether stewardship has succeeded. A university or business exercises it when performance review asks how results were obtained and who bore their costs, and when sanction for the abuse of position increases with the leader's knowledge and scope of responsibility, in keeping with the parable's proportionate logic (Luke 12:47–48). Torrance (2023) argued that accountability of this kind does not diminish flourishing but grounds it, and the parable supports that claim: households flourish precisely where stewards know they must answer for their care of others. Organizations that separate evaluation from morality, or that reserve consequences for subordinates while exempting senior leaders, reproduce the abusive steward's assumption that the master delays his coming.

Summary of Biblical Leadership Implications

Luke 12:42–48 presents a coherent and multi-dimensional model of steward leadership. The setting of the parable shows that leadership must be interpreted within the context of readiness, delegated responsibility, and the possibility of reckoning. The structure of the parable identifies two opposed patterns of leadership: one marked by faithful provision and one marked by abuse, self-indulgence, and exploitation. The earthly details of steward, household, food distribution, violence, delay, and punishment clarify that leadership in the passage is practical, custodial, and exercised over people and resources that belong to another. The main points of the parable indicate that the steward's role is derivative rather than possessive, that answerability increases with knowledge and obligation, and that leadership legitimacy is disclosed in the condition of

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those under one's care. The theological presentation of the passage further shows that stewardship in Luke is inseparable from readiness before the master, moral evaluation, and ordered provision within the household. Taken together, these methodological results identify several leadership principles and practices: delegated responsibility, vigilance under delayed reckoning, faithful provision, non-exploitative use of power, moral answerability, proportionate judgment, and care for dependents as the concrete expression of communal well-being. In that respect, the parable presents stewardship not as generalized benevolence, but as accountable custody exercised for the good of others under the expectation of judgment.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Luke 12:42–48 refines steward leadership theory by presenting leadership as delegated responsibility, by framing accountability as evaluative and proportionate, and by locating the welfare of others at the center of faithful stewardship. First, the analysis showed that Luke 12:42–48 aligns with steward leadership by presenting leadership as derivative responsibility exercised on behalf of others rather than as possessive control. Second, the analysis demonstrated that the parable sharpens the theory by framing reckoning as moral and proportionate, not merely structural or procedural. Third, the analysis indicated that the good secured through leadership in this text is seen most clearly in faithful provision for dependents rather than in leader success or institutional self-preservation. Luke 12:42–48 therefore does more than illustrate stewardship. It refines steward leadership theory by clarifying how delegated responsibility, evaluative judgment, and the welfare of others belong together within a single account of leadership.

One strength of the present study is that it treated Luke 12:42–48 within its immediate narrative setting rather than as a detachable leadership maxim. The logic of the passage turns on delegated responsibility under the possibility of delay, abuse, return, and judgment. Bauckham (1983) showed that this material belongs to the Synoptic *Parousia* tradition, where delayed return intensifies rather than weakens present ethical seriousness. Van Aarde (1988) likewise demonstrated that Luke's narrative point of view places readers within a world of vigilance, responsibility, and evaluative readiness. The paper's claims therefore rest on Luke's own narrative presentation of stewardship. The passage does not offer a general commendation of prudent management. It presents entrusted authority within a world in which treatment of others, use of resources, and fidelity to the master's will remain subject to judgment.

Contribution to Scholarly Literature

The present study contributes to the steward leadership literature by confirming substantial overlap with the theory while also identifying several areas in which Luke 12:42–48 sharpens and, in some respects, unsettles contemporary formulations. Steward leadership research commonly emphasizes trusteeship, stakeholder care, responsibility, and long-term obligation (Caldwell et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; Lawler, 2014; Tolbert, 2023). Luke 12:42–48 clearly resonates with those concerns. The steward is entrusted with real responsibility over persons and resources, and his legitimacy is measured by how he administers that trust. At the same time, the parable

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places that trust under delayed reckoning, moral judgment, and real consequences for abuse. In that respect, the passage does more than reinforce a general stewardship ethic. It presses steward leadership theory to account more fully for the evaluative and disciplinary dimensions of entrusted authority.

At the same time, the passage clarifies the status and purpose of authority with greater precision than is often found in contemporary steward leadership theory. Existing literature frequently treats authority as something to be used responsibly, but it does not always specify with equal clarity whether authority is fundamentally possessed, delegated, or conditionally held (Hernandez, 2008; Tolbert, 2023). Luke 12:42–48 addresses that issue directly. The steward does not own the household, the resources, or the role he occupies. He functions within a framework of delegated trust defined by the will and eventual return of the master. Authority in this passage is therefore derivative rather than autonomous. It is not an entitlement attached to position, but a custody exercised on behalf of another. This distinction refines steward leadership theory by clarifying that stewardship is not merely a moral style of leadership. It is a specific account of authority as entrusted and answerable. This point also exposes a tension with softer forms of steward leadership discourse that emphasize responsibility and trust but leave underdeveloped the possibility of misuse, reckoning, and sanction.

The passage also refines the theory's understanding of accountability. Steward leadership scholarship regularly associates stewardship with responsibility, trust, and fidelity, but the standards by which stewardship is assessed are not always clearly distinguished. In some formulations, accountability appears primarily as governance structure or organizational answerability; in others, it appears as fidelity to mission or stakeholder welfare (Caldwell et al., 2008; Keay, 2017; Tolbert, 2023). Luke 12:42–48 sharpens these categories by presenting accountability as moral, evaluative, and proportionate. The steward is judged not only for whether he held a position, but for how he used it. Abuse of servants, self-indulgence, and failure of provision are treated as corruptions of entrusted authority. The final verses intensify this logic by tying judgment to knowledge and responsibility. Accountability in this passage therefore exceeds procedural review. It concerns whether delegated authority has been exercised faithfully or abusively and whether those under a leader's care have been provided for or harmed. This contributes greater precision to steward leadership theory by showing that accountability must include moral evaluation of conduct and consequences, not merely structural mechanisms of oversight.

The severity of the parable's climax deserves direct treatment rather than quiet translation. Luke 12:46 depicts the returning master cutting the unfaithful steward in pieces and assigning him a place with the unbelievers, and verses 47 and 48 grade the beating administered according to the servant's knowledge of the master's will. Interpreters serve the text poorly when they either export this violence directly into organizational practice or dissolve it into a mild principle of consequences. The eschatological register of the language guards against both errors. Bauckham (1983) located this material within the Synoptic *Parousia* tradition, in which the delayed return intensifies present moral seriousness precisely because final evaluation belongs to the master and not to any intermediate authority. The parable therefore does not authorize leaders or institutions to punish with severity; it warns leaders that they themselves

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stand under an evaluation more searching than any institutional review. What transfers to contemporary theory is not the violence of the imagery but its structure: judgment in the parable is certain rather than hypothetical, proportionate rather than uniform, and directed with particular force at those who held knowledge and trust. Steward leadership theory can absorb that structure without domestication by acknowledging that some failures of stewardship are not performance shortfalls but moral breaches that rightly end a leader's tenure of trust. The parable's harshness thus functions as a boundary marker. It testifies that entrusted authority is not infinitely forgiving of abuse, and that a theory of stewardship without the possibility of real loss — of position, of standing, of the trust itself — has not yet taken the parable seriously (Torrance, 2023).

A further contribution concerns the meaning of flourishing. Steward leadership literature commonly associates stewardship with trust, organizational health, sustainability, and stakeholder well-being (Karns, 2011; Lawler, 2014; Till et al., 2019). Those emphases remain important, but they do not by themselves provide a sufficiently textured account of flourishing. In Luke 12:42–48, the most direct textual evidence points to faithful provision, protection from abuse, and the welfare of those dependent on the steward's administration. The faithful steward gives others their food allowance at the proper time, whereas the abusive steward exploits subordinates and indulges himself. On the level of the parable itself, flourishing is therefore tied most clearly to provision and the ordered care of the household. Luke's wider theological world expands that picture. Miller (2014) showed that Luke's stewardship theology is tied to provision and justice for vulnerable persons, while Newberry (2025) connected Lukan economic practice to peace, just relations, and communal well-being. Taken together, the parable and its wider Lukan context give steward leadership theory a stronger account of flourishing by directing attention toward faithful provision and, more broadly, toward the welfare of those most affected by the use of authority.

These findings also help clarify the relation between steward leadership and adjacent theories without allowing the discussion to drift into broader theory comparison. Steward leadership overlaps with servant leadership in its concern for others, but Luke 12:42–48 places heavier emphasis on trusteeship, delegated responsibility, and evaluative accountability than on service language alone. That distinction matters because it shows why steward leadership is the more appropriate dialogue partner for this study. The passage is not primarily concerned with the leader's posture of service in the abstract, though that concern is not absent. Its central burden is the exercise of entrusted authority under judgment for the sake of those who depend upon that authority. In this respect, Luke 12:42–48 gives steward leadership theory a more textually grounded framework for explaining why authority matters, how it is normed, and for whose good it is exercised.

The scholarly implications of these findings are direct. Research on steward leadership would benefit from treating authority more explicitly as delegated trust rather than leaving it implicit behind responsibility language. The literature would also benefit from distinguishing procedural accountability from moral accountability and from specifying more clearly the evaluative standards by which stewardship succeeds or fails. Finally, research on flourishing within steward leadership would gain precision if flourishing were defined not only in terms of positive organizational climate or leader development, but also in terms of faithful provision, justice in the use of resources, and

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the welfare of those most vulnerable to misuse of power. Such refinements would not discard the strengths of current steward leadership theory. They would sharpen its conceptual boundaries and strengthen its explanatory coherence.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Luke 12:42–48 contributes more than a biblical illustration of stewardship. The parable offers a more precise account of what steward leadership entails by presenting leadership as delegated trust rather than possessive control, by treating stewardship as subject to evaluative and proportionate judgment, and by locating the common good in the faithful care of dependents rather than in the status, security, or indulgence of the leader. In that sense, the passage refines steward leadership theory by giving its central categories greater theological and ethical precision.

CONCLUSION

This paper applied Osborne’s hermeneutical principles for interpreting parables to Luke 12:42–48 to assess how the passage refines steward leadership theory. The analysis indicated that the parable presents a theologically grounded account of leadership in which responsibility is delegated, misuse of power remains answerable to judgment, and the care of others stands at the center of faithful stewardship. In that respect, the passage does not merely illustrate stewardship. The findings sharpen the purpose of leadership, the standards of its evaluation, and the moral vision by which its outcomes should be judged.

This analysis also has clear limitations. It focused on a single Lukan pericope, employed one primary methodological lens, and placed the passage in dialogue with steward leadership theory specifically. That framing maintained conceptual clarity, but it may also have foregrounded those dimensions of leadership most visible within contemporary stewardship scholarship. In addition, because Luke 12:42–48 was interpreted as a distinct parabolic unit within a larger discourse on readiness, the present study necessarily gave greater attention to the steward imagery than to the broader thematic development of Luke 12:35–48 as a whole. A specific next step for future research would be to compare Luke 12:42–48 with 1 Corinthians 4:1–2 to assess whether entrusted authority, evaluative accountability, and faithful stewardship constitute a broader New Testament pattern for steward leadership. Such a study would help determine whether the refinements proposed here arise primarily from Luke’s parabolic presentation or reflect a wider apostolic theology of leadership as entrusted responsibility under judgment.

About the Author

Matt Hattabaugh serves as pastor of GoChurch Beirut and as founder and director of Go Middle East, a ministry that trains leaders and plants churches across the 22 nations of the Middle East and North Africa. He is the National Director of RHEMA Bible Training Center Lebanon and the Divisional Leader for the Middle East and Levant. A 1992 graduate of RHEMA Bible Training College, he holds an MBA in Organizational

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Leadership from Oklahoma Wesleyan University. He and his wife, Julie, have two adult children and have served in Beirut, Lebanon, since 2017.

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