



Jesus' surprising reversals—part 4

the reversal of beatitude

Luke 6.²⁰⁻²⁶

²⁰Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled.

Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh.

²²Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.

²³Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets.

²⁴But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation.

²⁵Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger."

Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep.

²⁶Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you!

For so did their fathers to the false prophets.

Introduction to the series

Today's homily is the fourth in a series of homilies entitled: "Jesus' Surprising Reversals."

This series of homilies will focus on the Gospel of Luke, as he among the Gospel writers best epitomizes this theme. Or so it seems to me.

In this series of homilies, we will examine how Jesus challenged, resisted, and—at least in his own life and ministry—reversed the world's value system, especially as it weighed and still to this day weighs, the worth of individuals, or, in the language of the Doctrine and

Covenants, “the worth of souls.”¹ In challenging, resisting, and reversing the world’s twisted value system, Jesus will surprise us by the individuals with whom he associates and the individuals whom he holds up as role models. He will also surprise us by being critical of those whom society thought of as heroic and looked to as role models. We will watch as Jesus brings a reversal of fortune to those whom he serves and a changing of the guard when it comes to role models of discipleship.

I might have named this series, “Jesus’ *Offensive* Reversals,” for his reversals often offended those who witnessed them—in word or deed. However, Jesus’ reversals as recorded by Luke were intended to do more than surprise. And they offended only to the degree that they challenged, resisted, and reversed the world’s value system, especially as it weighs the worth of individuals.

I believe, in fact, that Jesus’ challenge to and reversal of the world’s value system belongs near the top of any list concerning the purposes and objectives of his life, his teaching, and his ministry as a whole. Even more recognized and appreciated aspects of Jesus’ ministry—his healings, for example, or his teachings, or even his atoning sacrifice, death, and following resurrection, ascension, and enthronement—even these represent a challenge to and reversal of the world’s influences and values.

Jesus’ challenges to the world’s value system, however, are about more than simple ethics, as important as those are. They go beyond matters of how mortal beings conduct themselves *visa via* others while living on this terrestrial planet. His challenges are more far reaching than the temporal existence of this world. His challenges to the world’s current value systems have applications to the cosmos and how immortal beings exist and endure in the eternal realms. And, as always in Jesus’ intentions, they teach us something of the character of God, Himself.

¹ DC 18.¹⁰

In obedience to his Heavenly Father's call, Jesus, in word and deed, resists and reverses the world's perverted value system that denies the worth of each individual. In our first homily, we listened as his mother announced this call to reverse the fortunes of rich and poor, mighty and weak, oppressed and oppressor.² In our second, we listened as Jesus taught—and offended—attendees at Nazareth's synagogue, presenting them a widow and leper from enemy states as role models of faith while, at the same time, warning against the unfaithful examples of Israelite widows and lepers.³ In our third homily, we watched Jesus stand against his religious leaders' considerable peer pressure to devalue and shun sinners. His willing intimacy with those labeled "publican sinners" along with his anxious service toward them makes all who become aware of his activities content with being named sinners rather than "the righteous" so as to not miss out on his ministrations.⁴

In today's homily, Jesus returns to his use of instruction as a means of bringing about the reversal of values and the estimation of personal worth. He does so through the common genre known in Greek as "Macarism" and in English as "Beatitude." This genre identifies characteristics, attitudes, activities that encompass a fulfilling, fortunate, rewarding, happy, and content life. Jesus' beatitudes, especially as reported by Luke are beyond surprising, reverse the common attitude toward "blessedness," and serve to further Jesus' labor to resist and reverse the world's upside-down value systems and efforts to devalue the worth of marginalized individuals and groups.

Shining light on the shade of matthew's beatitudes

Jesus' beatitudes are some of the best known of all Jesus' teachings. Both Matthew and Luke record a series of beatitudes associated with what is called the Sermon on the Mount. While

² Luke 1.⁴⁶⁻⁵⁵

³ Luke 4.²³⁻³⁰

⁴ Luke 5.²⁷⁻³²

Matthew records nine beatitudes, Luke records but four, while recording, in addition, four “woes” that parallel and contrast with the four beatitudes. The four beatitudes that the two Evangelist have in common are strikingly different in tone.

It will not do to ask which, if either, is the more authentic “historical” version. Any answer will be speculative and based more on personal bias than objective fact. One can play apologist and proclaim that the differences are more imagined than real, but the fact is, there are significant differences. If nothing else, Luke’s addition of four woes that contrast with the four beatitudes alone demonstrates the immense difference between the two Gospel’s reported beatitudes. Rather than setting one up as superior to the other, it seems best to appreciate what both versions have to say of their own accord.

The fact is that one highly inspired and respected Christian, Luke by name, after extensive investigation felt that his version of Jesus’ beatitudes was consistent with the thought and character of the carpenter from Galilee. It is certain that Luke’s version of the four beatitudes is utterly consistent with the theme of this series of homilies. Jesus’ beatitudes as reported by Luke represent an example of reversal as radical and as hopeful as any that can be found among the many we examine in this series.

It is Matthew’s beatitudes that seem to get all the press and are most often read and quoted. Why this should be, I can only guess. But, for what it is worth, my guess is that Matthew’s beatitudes provide more shade, grant the reader more room to hide. There is less shade in Luke’s, making it harder to hide from his beatitudes.

For example, Matthew’s, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” is illusive—as is evidenced by the unceasing discussions over defining what it means to be “poor in spirit,” and the myriad of varying conclusions, often disappointing and unsatisfying. Such “spirit” poverty is nearly impossible to see and even harder to measure. Knowledge and ability to do something about this sort of poverty is more difficult yet.

Luke’s, “Bless be ye poor,” on the other hand, is clear. Temporal poverty is easily observed

and measured. How to reverse and heal this poverty is patently obvious—more resources. Yet, at both the private and public level, we justify our doing very little to alleviate the suffering of the poor. Matthew, it seems, allows us to feel better about our neglect than Luke.

There are other differences between the two versions. Now is not the time to go into detail on all of them. But we should mention one other difference, as it, too, serves to reduce the shade in which we so often take shelter when contemplating Matthew's beatitudes. In our current comparison, we wish to ignore all the differences except for the personal pronouns. Here are Luke's first three beatitudes.

“Blessed be ye poor: for *yours* is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are ye that hunger now: for *ye* shall be filled.
Blessed are ye that weep now: for *ye* shall laugh.”

And here are Matthew's corresponding beatitudes.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for *theirs* is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for *they* shall be filled.
Blessed are they that mourn: for *they* shall be comforted.”⁵

Again, we focus on only the first beatitude. “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for *theirs* is the kingdom of heaven.” It seems here that Jesus might be speaking of those who are safely distant and not present. Jesus is talking about someone other than me. If I understood what Jesus meant by “poor in spirit,” I might still miss the comfort intended for *them*. At the same time, if I understood what Jesus meant by “poor in spirit,” I might still be able to avoid offering assistance, as I do not have to personalize or look *them* in the eye.

Compare this with, “Blessed be ye poor; for *yours* is the kingdom of God.” Jesus is looking the people of whom he is speaking right in the eyes. This is highly personal. This personal touch does not allow me to hide behind someone else. Any thought of the theoretical is

⁵ Matthew 5.^{3, 6, 4}

exorcised. If I self-identify as poor, Jesus is looking right at me, speaking right to me, comforting me directly. If I do not self-identify as poor, I am forced to look real poverty straight in the eye. It will be much more difficult for me to ignore the plight of the one sitting at my shoulder and withhold my assistance from them.

The removal of shade is even more evident in the personalized “woes.”

“Woe unto you that are rich!”

“Woe unto you that are full! “

“Woe unto you that laugh now!”

“Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you!”

Deserving indeed are each of these lines of the exclamation points! There’s no chance of looking around and concluding that Jesus is talking about someone else—them. Nope. He is talking to you and me, present in spirit if not in body.

As we examine Jesus’ beatitudes as recorded by Luke, we leave Matthew’s shade and stand under a blazingly hot and bright sun. We might begin to feel a little like the religious leaders who observed Jesus’ intimate association with publican sinners in Levi’s house and sensed the challenge that intimate association represented to their personal bias and false estimations of personal worth.

Jesus’ jarring, and beatific, reversal

For a host of reasons, Jesus’ “blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God” is jarring, unless, or course, one is poor. Then it is beatific. It is made doubly jarring by its parallel woe: “Woe unto you that are rich! For ye have received your consolation,”⁶ i.e., “yours is not the kingdom of heaven.” Notwithstanding the absence of the slightest scriptural justification, how often perverted doctrines lead some to think that the poverty of the poor is the result of a

⁶ Here we see the profound difference between the Beatitudes of Luke and Matthew. Given the normal interpretations of “poor in spirit,” never could a woe be added: “woe unto the poor in spirit.”

fatal flaw and personal wickedness inherent to the poor individual! How could those so flawed possibly inherit a kingdom reserved for “the righteous?” the doctrinally suspect asks. And, again, notwithstanding the numerous scriptural passages to the contrary, how often many imagine that the rich have earned their riches through righteousness. And being “righteous,” how could they *not* enter the kingdom of God?

And yet, without equivocation, Jesus, with his promise of heaven, identifies the poor as righteous while, at the same time, identifying the rich as wicked as it is the wicked to be exempt from the kingdom. Jesus’ reversal of all that we so foolishly and erroneously hold true boggles the mind. On another occasion, Jesus managed to boggle the minds of his closest disciples when he addressed earthly financial matters in relation to heavenly and eternal. “It is easier,” Jesus announced, “for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”⁷

“When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed [“astonished out of measure,” according to Mark] saying, ‘Who then can be saved?’”⁸ If it was a near certainty that rich men couldn’t enter the kingdom of God, the disciples reasoned, then, surely, no one could. In the disciple’s response, we see and understand that they had been captured by the same twisted value system as most of the rest of the world.

But the world could not capture Jesus. The dark prince of this world might come looking for him but would find no ally in him.⁹

Jesus’ reversal should not, in fact, have boggled the mind of his disciples. And it would not have had they been paying more attention to God’s value system as found in scripture and less attention to the world’s false doctrines concerning poverty. The poor are often equated

⁷ Forget, please, everything you have ever heard about unloading camels at city “camel gates.” They play no role here, as they had not yet been invented. Besides, if that little bit of apologetic justification for wealth held, why were the disciples “astonished out of measure”? Could they figure out what such an apologist figured out—it was possible for the rich to enter into heaven! They just had to be clever in the transfer of their wealth from outside the city to inside the city.

⁸ See Matthew 19.²⁴⁻²⁵ and Mark 10.²⁵⁻²⁶.

⁹ See John 14.³⁰

with the righteous and the rich are often equated with the wicked. We see this equivalency in Hebrew poetry's use of parallelism, with its inclination to repeat and amplify in paired lines of poetry.

“The wicked have drawn out the sword,
and have bent their bow,
to cast down the poor and needy,
and to slay such as be of upright conversation...

little that a righteous man hath
is better than the riches of many wicked.¹⁰

Here, we not only see the “poor and need” are parallel and associated with those of “upright conversation,” but we are reminded that the “righteous” often have little and that the “wicked” often possess “riches.”

We could go on, but this is a topic we have taken up in homilies devoted to a just society. It is enough to say that in Jesus' reversal, the poor and rich switch places in regard to respectability. In this world, the poor are disrespected and disenfranchised while the poor are respected and given the place of honor. In God's kingdom, both here and in eternity, the poor are given the place of honor and the rich... well, they are left outside the gates of the city beautiful.

This same astonishing type of reversal is evident in each of Luke's remaining three beatitudes. No one wants to be hungry or to weep or to be ill-spoken of any more than they wish to be poor. No ten-year-old ever said, “Oh how I hope to be poor, hungry, sad, and unpopular when I grow up!” On the other hand, whoever hoped to avoid the vicissitudes of being rich, well-fed, joyous, and popular? But in Jesus' reversal of values and estimations of personal worth, Jesus' beatitudes as reported by Luke turns all of this on its head.

¹⁰ Psalm 37.^{14, 16}

Poverty with its accompanying hunger is not what we thought it to be. Wealth and financial security are not what we were taught them it to be. Oh, you can try to finesse Jesus; claim Jesus is engaged in no such radical reversal and redefinition. You can go right on saying, “but of course money doesn’t bring happiness.” You can go ahead and claim that “Of course, the poor can be perfectly happy.” But you do not believe a word of such mumbo jumbo. I see how hard you work to be rich, well-fed, content, and well-liked. I see how desperately you labor to avoid poverty, hungry, discontentment, and rejection.

But, when Jesus is finished with his beatitudes, he has made us rethink all our vain justifications and labors. “Why, almost, Jesus, thou persuadest me to desire poverty, hunger, sadness, and rejection.”

Now, Jesus is no masochist. He doesn’t demand that we seek and live a life of poverty and hunger and sadness and rejection—though he was, himself “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief¹¹—any more than he demands that we be a sinner of the publican sort—though he was made “to be sin for us.”¹² But he most definitely demands that we critically reexamine the twisted value system the world has bequeathed us. He most certainly demands that we look beyond this perverted value system as we examine and estimate the value of those around us. He especially demands that we rethink our posture toward individuals and populations that have been devalued, ostracized, disenfranchised and ill-spoken of. He demands that we understand that “reward” and “punishment” both in this world and in the world to come are distributed in ways that may diametrically oppose the “wisdom” we have inherited from a world gone mad with delusion.

Conclusion and benediction

Mary predicted that her son would anxiously and successfully engage in and dedicate himself to doing God’s work. He would resist the world’s value system and reverse the fortunes of

¹¹ See Isaiah 53.³

¹² See 2 Corinthians 5.²¹

those either trapped in or those perpetuating the world's perverted estimations concerning individual worth.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”¹³

In Jesus' beatitudes as recorded by Luke, we see him being true to his mother's intuition. We watch as he takes a chain saw to the very foundations of worldly “wisdom” and its false value system. His beatitudes, with their accompanying “woes,” reflect a remarkable similarity to his mother's intuition.

In Jesus' “blessed be ye poor” and “blessed are ye that hunger,” we hear echoes of “the hungry” being “filled...with good things” as found in Mary's Magnificat.

In his “blessed are ye that weep,” and “blessed are ye, when men shall hate you,” we hear the reflection of Mary's assertion that God would “exalt them of low degree.”

On the flip side, in Jesus' “woe unto you that are rich” and “woe unto you that are full,” we hear confirmation of God sending “empty away” “the rich.”

In his “woe unto you that laugh” and “woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you,” we hear evidence of God “put[ting] down the mighty from their seats.”

Yes, there is a woe pronounced upon those who accept and live by the world's upside down and inside out doctrine of personal worth. And there is a blessedness beyond imagining for those who reject that doctrine and live by God's eternal perspective of individual worth. The radical reversals found in the woes and blessedness of Jesus' beatitudes are as central to the purposes of his ministry as any aspect of his ministry.

¹³ Luke 1.⁵²⁻⁵³

I do not know about you, but Jesus' reversal of fortunes brings me great comfort. Not because I am poor or hungry or sad or ill-spoken of, for I am not, but because I have seen in the faces of too many of the world's poor the underserved pain and suffering that poverty brings. My hearts leaps for joy, still, and every time I read of the compensation he has in store for the poor. How blessed they will be in God's kingdom. In the latter days, the Lord said it like this.

“And also that a feast of fat things might be prepared for the poor; yea, a feast of fat things, of wine on the lees well refined, that the earth may know that the mouths of the prophets shall not fail; yea, a supper of the house of the Lord, well prepared, unto which all nations shall be invited. First, the rich and the learned, the wise and the noble; and after that cometh the day of my power; then shall the poor, the lame, and the blind, and the deaf, come in unto the marriage of the Lamb, and partake of the supper of the Lord, prepared for the great day to come.”¹⁴

Oh, that the blessed day of his power might soon come!

With our minds and hearts focused on Jesus' beatitudes and their accompanying woes, today is as good a time as any to critically reexamine our value system and the criteria by which we evaluate the worth of individual and groups. It is as good a time as any to jettison any infiltrations that the false doctrines of a mad and deluded world have made into our souls. Today is as good a time as any to check any impulses to use the world's false value system to vainly build ourselves up in such ways as can only bring eventual and eternal collapse. Today is as good a time as any to accept Jesus' reversals of fortune for what they are: the eternal words and work of the Lord God Almighty.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹⁴ DC 58.⁸⁻¹¹