



## jesus' surprising reversals

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*“...The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live...” (Ecclesiastes 9:3)*

*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before the high God?*

*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;  
and what doth the LORD require of thee,  
but to do justly, and to love mercy,  
and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6.6,8)*

Part 1—a mother’s intuition: of the mighty and rich, the lowly and the hungry

Luke 1. <sup>46-55</sup>

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said,

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,

<sup>47</sup>And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

<sup>48</sup>For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:

for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

<sup>49</sup>For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;

and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup>And his mercy is on them that fear him

from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup>He hath shewed strength with his arm;

he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup>He hath put down the mighty from their seats,

and exalted them of low degree.

<sup>53</sup>He hath filled the hungry with good things;

and the rich he hath sent empty away.

<sup>54</sup>He hath holpen his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy;

<sup>55</sup>As he spake to our fathers,

to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.”

## Introduction to the series

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Today’s homily is the first 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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 vis-a-vis 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.

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<sup>1</sup> DC 18.<sup>10</sup>

I have commented on today's text numerous times. Jesus' mother seems to have shared our view that the reversal of the world's value system was as central to Jesus' life and ministry as any other purpose. In her famous Magnificat uttered in the presence of her cousin, Elisabeth, she makes no mention of the more traditional appreciations of her son's ministry. Rather, in her Magnificat, Mary discerns that God will work through her son to reveal, challenge, and reverse the world's distorted value systems.

“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.”

Mary's Magnificat, then, could be thought of as a kind of Divine mission call or mission statement issued to Jesus through his mother. How often did Mary remind Jesus of the call and mission to which God had ordained him?

Mary, of course, could utilize her own experiences as evidence of God's intent to bring about startling reversals. As the world judged things—and as she judged things under its influence—Mary was a woman of “low estate.” But, much to her surprise, she had “found favour with God.” God reversed the way she would be thought of and remembered, as “all generations” would call her “blessed.”

Mary's experience of the reversal of fortunes is, of course, consistent with Israel's very first experience with Yahweh, who saw the cruelty of Israel's Egyptian oppressors, heard Israel's pleas for deliverance, came down to humble the arrogant Egyptian taskmasters, set Israel free, and called the nation as an ambassador to bear witness of his character to the nations of the earth.

“And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt,

and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey...”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus’ intentions are also consistent with the Psalmist’s testimony concerning Yahweh’s interest in and assistance of the lowly and oppressed,<sup>3</sup> a core part of his eternal nature.

“The LORD is high above all nations,  
and his glory above the heavens.  
Who is like unto the LORD our God,  
who dwelleth on high,  
Who humbleth himself  
to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!  
*He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,  
and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill;  
That he may set him with princes,  
even with the princes of his people.”*<sup>4</sup>

Based, then, on Israel’s intimate experience with Yahweh, scripture’s testimony of Yahweh’s unchanging character, and her own experience, Mary entertained no doubts about her son’s ultimate success. Hence, she could speak as if he had already accomplished his mission of reversal. We note the past tense of her verbs.

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

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 3.<sup>7-8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This testimony of God stands in stark contrast with that American evangelical “Christianity,” whose God exists only to justify and maintain a privileged white power structure—a power structure that looks for all the world too much like the ancient dynastic Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 113.<sup>4-8</sup>

“The mighty” are not thrown down from their power merely as punishment for the crimes that brought them to such power or the manner in which they exercised their power. The “rich” are not “sent empty away” merely as punishment for having purchased their wealth through the exploitation of the poor. Such reversals would set the universe right-side-up. They would also serve as warning to all. “What you earthlings call power is not real power. What you falsely call power can be gone in the blink of an eye. What you deem as wealth is transitory and undependable. What is real is the evil means by which you gained your false power and wealth. That reality, that evil will follow you far after your power and wealth have vanished into nothingness.”

By the time Jesus has finished his life’s work of reversal, he will have turned the world upside down, topsy-turvy, and inside out. Those who might justifiably be thought of as heroes and role models will never look the same. In his kingdom, those who were thought first in the eyes of this world’s kingdoms will be last. In his kingdom, those who were thought last in the eyes of this world’s kingdoms will be first.

This may not be such good news for the high and mighty. But for the likes of Mary, this is glad tidings of great joy, indeed. Little wonder that she exalted,

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,  
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

### Conclusion and benediction

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Through Mary’s Magnificat, then, Luke has introduced one of his themes and one of Jesus’ principle objectives. Consistent with the divine and eternal character, Jesus intends to reveal the world’s twisted value system that devalues individuals and justifies the injustices that the powerful, influential, and wealthy perpetrate against those that the world wickedly devalues. But he will do more than reveal those twisted values. He will serve those who have been

devalued, thereby showing their true eternal worth, and challenging and reversing the world's perverted values. In revealing the worth of the lowly, he will raise them up. In revealing the false pride of the exalted, he will bring them low. Finally, he will let it be known that he expects those who would be his disciples to pick up and carry on his work of revelation and reversal.

Today is as good a time as any to check all our high mindedness at the door lest we be put down and sent away empty. Today is as good a time as any to humble ourselves, deem ourselves the least of all, knowing that God has far more filling and exalting joy in store for us than the meager and transitory pleasures this world offers.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

## Part 2—a prophet’s inspiration: of sidonian, Syrian, and israleite widows and lepers

### Luke 4.<sup>23-30</sup>

<sup>23</sup>And he said unto them, “Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country.’” <sup>24</sup>And he said, “Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. <sup>25</sup>But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; <sup>26</sup>but unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. <sup>27</sup>And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian.”

<sup>28</sup>And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, <sup>29</sup>And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. <sup>30</sup>But he passing through the midst of them went his way...

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## **i**ntroduction to today’s homily

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In part one of this series, we listened to Mary’s enraptured revelation of the unheard-of reversal that God intended to accomplish through her lowly son.

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.<sup>2</sup>

This same spirit of reversal is found in today's texts. Those of whom Mary speaks as being of "low degree" and "hungry" are replaced in today's reading with Jesus' widowed woman from Sidon and Syrian leper, who found themselves filled and healed through faith. At the same time, Mary's "mighty" and "rich" are replaced by Jesus' Israelite widows and lepers, who found themselves empty and diseased by their unfaithfulness. In his interpretation and exposition of scripture, Jesus created a whole new class of role model. As we will see, Jesus' audience found his proposal unwelcomed. They rejected it out of hand, and violently.

#### **a** prophet's inspiration

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Whatever one decides about the overall "historical chronology" of Jesus' ministry, Luke chooses to report this reversal in which Jesus creates a new class of role model as part of Jesus' first public appearance at the beginning of his earthly ministry. This points to the centrality of Jesus' work of reversal—at least as far as Luke was concerned, influenced, perhaps by Mary.

Having only recently returned from his forty-day desert fast and trial, during which, no doubt, his Father has provided confirmation and added instruction concerning his mission as revealed to Mary, Jesus attends sabbath worship services in his hometown of Nazareth. During this service, Jesus is invited to read from the synagogue's sacred scrolls. Reversal is clearly already on his mind. He reads:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor;

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1.<sup>52-53</sup>

hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted,  
to preach deliverance to the captives,  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty them that are bruised,  
To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

Having finished his reading, and while he had everyone’s attention, Jesus “began to say unto them, ‘this day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.’”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus utilizes Isaiah’s inspiration to declare his own intentions. He has come down from heaven to serve, strengthen, protect, and reverse the fortunes of the weak, the oppressed, the vulnerable. This is not only consistent with Mary’s maternal intuition and Isaiah’s prophetic insight, but is, as we have previously reminded, consistent with Israel’s very first experience with Yahweh. It was Yahweh who saw the cruelty of Israel’s Egyptian oppressors, heard Israel’s pleas for deliverance, came down to humble the arrogant Egyptian taskmasters, set Israel free, and called the nation as an ambassador to bear witness of his redeeming character—a warning to the nations of the earth.

The same spirit that rested upon Yahweh, rests upon Jesus. The same character that occupied Deity’s bosom, occupies Jesus’. Jesus would bring about the same types of reversal of fortunes as those Yahweh had brought to Israel’s progenitors.

**a** new brand of role model

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Luke records the congregation’s response to Jesus’ reading and his claim to possess the same spirit and calling as Yahweh.

“And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 4.<sup>18-19</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4.<sup>21</sup>

his mouth. And they said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”<sup>5</sup>

No doubt, Jesus’ “gracious words” left some positively impressed with the young man. But from Jesus response to the congregation, it seems that most were, at best, confused. Many were offended. And worse, many offered violent resistance. Whether the congregation was confused, offended, or resistant, Jesus issued the warning found in today’s reading.

“Be careful, you who think of yourselves as God’s chosen people, that you do not dismiss me as your ancestors dismissed Elijah and Elisha.” Jesus then presented them with role models to follow. In addition to presenting them heroes to emulate, however, he also offered them anti-heroes whose examples they were to shun.

Perhaps his audience could have stomached Jesus presenting Israelite widows and Israelite lepers as anti-heroes. The historical record was clear, after all: their Israelite forebearers were subject to error and sin. The prophet, Jeremiah, had gone so far as to declare,

“For the children of Israel and the children of Judah have only done evil before me from their youth... For this city hath been to me as a provocation of mine anger and of my fury from the day that they built it even unto this day; that I should remove it from before my face...”<sup>6</sup>

So, to draw lessons from Israel’s past transgressions might have been acceptable. But, as his mother well knew, Jesus’ mission called for something yet more radical. And radical he gave them. To appreciate Jesus’ radicalness, we must remind ourselves who the Sidonians/Tyrians and Syrians are.

Tyre and Sidon were ancient and prestigious Phoenician city-states that the New Testament nearly always mention in the same breath. Except for a brief interlude when Hiram, King of Tyre, cooperated with Solomon in his ambitious building projects, including that of the

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 4.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 32.<sup>30-31</sup>

temple, the district of Tyre and Sidon was a near constant commercial competitor and military foe of Israel and Judah, especially in the Old Testament and before Roman rule. Upon Judah's defeat and destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, Tyre and Sidon had, like so many of Judah's neighbors, rubbed salt in Judah's wounds by taking advantage of Judah's plight and enriching itself through the confiscation of previously Israelite lands and oppressing Jewish refugees. So incensed was Ezekiel by Tyre and Sidon's behavior that he devoted three chapters to exalt in their collapse and destruction.<sup>7</sup> While the district fell, first to the Assyrians and then the Greeks, it remained an important Roman district in Jesus' lifetime.

The nation of Syria was a centuries-long determined enemy of both the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah, with constantly shifting boundaries between them depending on military fortunes one way or the other. Like his more famous fellow prophet, Isaiah, Amos included Syria (Damascus) in his oracles against the nations. The nation's violence against Israel's population was likened to threshing wheat. One can almost feel Syrian swords slash at and mutilate Israelite citizens—man, woman, and child. Yahweh would not forget such extreme violence.

“Thus saith the LORD;  
For three transgressions of Damascus,  
and for four,  
I will not turn away the punishment thereof;  
because they have threshed Gilead  
with threshing instruments of iron:  
But I will send a fire into the house of Hazael,  
which shall devour the palaces of Benhadad.  
I will break also the bar of Damascus,  
and cut off the inhabitant from the plain of Aven,

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<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 26-28

and him that holdeth the sceptre from the house of Eden:  
and the people of Syria shall go into captivity unto Kir,  
saith the LORD.”<sup>8</sup>

The point here is that for a Jew in Jesus’ time, there was nothing redeeming or redeemable about Tyre and Sidon or Syria. Worse than being irredeemable, Sidonians and Syrians were hated for their anti-Jewish past. One can see, then, that holding a Sidonian widow and Syrian leper up as role models might be thought of as over the top. “Fine. Suggest that Israelite widows and lepers could have been more faithful. But don’t you dare suggest that a Sidonian widow or Syrian leper acted better or more faithfully than an Israelite counterpart. Don’t you dare hold such creatures up as role models for all Israelites to follow!”

But this is simply Jesus being Jesus, doing what Jesus did and does. Jesus is already, at the earliest stages of his ministry, following his mother’s premonition. He could find value in the most unlikely of places and in the most unlikely of people. And he is inviting those who see and hear him to join him in thinking outside the box. He is inviting them to humble themselves as is characteristic of their God. He is inviting them to reconsider their entire twisted value system and how they estimate the worth of the individual.

Jesus’ revelation of resistance and reversal of the world’s perverted value system went over like a led balloon. How dare Jesus “apply” the scriptures in such a way as to suggest that a Sidonian female or Syrian leper were more righteous than even the lowliest of Israelites. How dare he hold up as righteous examples for “God’s elect” to follow individuals who were citizens of enemy nations. How dare he turn villains into heroes. The grotesqueness of Jesus reversal filled the congregation with anger and transformed it into a murderous mob.

This response was, of course, not only common, but simply served to prove Jesus’ point. A prophet might be without honor in his own country, but this does not change the accuracy of the prophet’s inspiration and revelation.

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<sup>8</sup> Amos 1.<sup>3-5</sup>

Jesus was no provincial. He could never be a misogynist or a racist or a nationalist. He could never have pledged allegiance to one flag or sworn an oath to any single religion. He could never overlook the worth of any and every soul. He could never overlook or devalue the righteous example of any individual, be they of whatever gender or race or nationality or religion.

Jesus' use of a Sidonian widow and a Syrian leper as role models even at the expense of the more "appropriate" respected and honored Israelite widow or leper is an example of the sort of reversal of fortune and worth that his mother intuited would be central to her son's divine call and purpose. This divine largesse would not only be cause for his early rejection at Nazareth, but it would be foundational and instrumental in his ultimate murder on a cross. But, Jesus intended to turn the world on its head no matter its consequence to himself. He would sacrifice himself in order to reveal the truth and save an inside out world.

Today is as good a time as any to follow Jesus' example of high open mindedness. It is as good a time as any to follow examples of goodness and rightness wherever they may be found. It is as good a time as any to acknowledge that even our enemy can possess a righteousness that we lack. Today is as good a time as any to acknowledge that we are of no more or less worth than anyone else. Such awareness does not diminish us, it exalts us and turns us into the true children of God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Part 3—turning sinners into role models and heroes  
Luke 5.<sup>27-32</sup>

<sup>27</sup>And after these things he went forth, and saw a publican, named Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he said unto him, “Follow me.”

<sup>28</sup>And he left all, rose up, and followed him. <sup>29</sup>And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them. <sup>30</sup>But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, “Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?”

<sup>31</sup>And Jesus answering said unto them, “They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. <sup>32</sup>I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

**i**ntroduction to the series

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Introduction to today’s homily

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In our first homily of this series, we listened to Mary’s intuition concerning the role her son would play in resisting and reversing the world’s twisted value system of individual and personal worth. Jesus would act as God’s most intimate revelation to revolutionize the world through the reversal of fortunes.<sup>2</sup> This reversal of fortunes is epitomized in these lines from her Magnificat.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1. <sup>46-55</sup>

“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.”<sup>3</sup>

We can easily imagine that Mary often reminded her growing son of this intuition. We can also easily imagine that leading up to and during his forty-day fast and trial in the wilderness Jesus’ Father in Heaven provided instruction concerning this aspect of His son’s mission.

In our second homily in this series, we listened as Jesus, responding not only to his mother’s intuition and his Father’s instruction but to prophetic inspiration such as that found in Isaiah,<sup>4</sup> began his ministry by holding up a Sidonian widow and Syrian Leper as righteous examples whom Jews—God’s “chosen people”—would do well to emulate.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he used Israelite widows and lepers as bad examples. His Jewish audience rose in murderous intent at the disrespectful impudence of such a reversal of role models.

In the text for today’s homily, we once more find Jesus offending the sensibilities of his Jewish audience as he engages in yet another reversal of fortune by seeming to prefer the company of sinners to that of “the righteous.”

## Publicans and sinners

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In today’s reading, Jesus enters the home of one, Levi, who is a publican. Other publicans, a “great company” of them in fact, also enter the home. Others, viewed, like the publicans, as “sinners” by respectable, “righteous,” and leading Jews, join the party. Together, they sit down with Jesus in table fellowship, one of life’s most intimate moments according to the

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 1.<sup>52-53</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 61.<sup>1-2</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4.<sup>23-30</sup>

culture of the day. Jewish leaders who observe this party become incensed. What is wrong with Jesus? they wonder. Why would he associate with such scum?

We should be sure that we understand who and what a “publican” was. A publican was a kind of private contractor: in this case, a private Jewish citizen who contracted with the Roman Empire to carry out various public functions—most notably, but not exclusively, the collection of taxes. Such private Jewish contractors who worked with the Romans were, for reasons easy to imagine, often vilified—rather like the modern-day U.S. I.R.S agent who is vilified by the political right... but worse.

Publicans worked cooperatively with the Romans: a hated foreign occupying force. They collected money from their own people and handed it over to this hated occupier. The occupier then used the people’s own money against them: paying occupation forces, for example, or paying for the upkeep of horses, chariots, etc., which were then used to keep the populace docile and subservient. Honest tax-collectors legally used an agreed-upon percentage of their collection as personal wages, thus living off the taxed in view of the taxed. Less scrupulous tax-collectors were known to collect more than the contracted amount and pocket the overage.

For these and other reasons—the religious, for example, viewed the handling of Roman money as an unclean practice that defiled the handler... thus the money changers in the temple—publicans were viewed as “sinners.” They were thought to be guilty of crimes against their fellow-citizens and guilty of crimes against God by virtue of their vocation alone—ancient Judaism so thoroughly intertwined nation and God as to become, at times, little more than a form of nationalism.

There may have been other types of sinners at Levi’s dinner party, but by Jewish standards of the day, having publicans present was sin enough. We might well read Luke’s “publicans and sinners” as “publican sinners,” or “sinners of the publican sort.”

Jesus' religious leaders were incensed by Jesus' cavorting with sinners like the publicans. Given the nature of "publicanism," why not?

So, "why," asked Jesus' religious leaders, "do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?" We cannot read this question as an earnest desire to understand. They were not grappling with a perplexity. The question was posed, as Luke informs us, in a murmuring manner. In their "Why do ye..." we hear "How could you," or "How dare you," not in question form but in critical assertion.

Jesus is often challenged by the sort of insincere questioning that we find here. His answers are often offered in the same spirit as the questions that are posed to him. His answers—sometimes in the form of questions—are often offered as a challenge to the questioner and the misunderstandings, often willful, that produced the question. So, it is here. Jesus' answer must not be read as if presented with a straight face or as a simple factual statement. The "truth" of Jesus' answer has a bite to it. This gentle little lamb knows how to roar.

So, what *is* Jesus doing keeping company with such sinners? He does not act as "the righteous" act. Why does he flout convention so? Surely, he knows he is going to create a scene, cause tongues to wag, get nasty messages on Face Book, be attacked on Twitter, get labeled a bleeding-heart liberal. We suspect that we already know the answer to the religious leaders' insincere question, but we will let Jesus answer it for himself.

"They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Jesus has come, he informs his critics to serve a very specific clientele: the sick and the sinners. Just as a doctor has no concern for or business with those who do not need his services, Jesus is uninterested in those who have no need for his healing services. Jesus' saying here is consistent with Isaiah's insight that Jesus had shared at Nazareth—that he has come to serve

those in trouble, those who are troubled.

But, Jesus answer brings several questions to mind—my mind at least.

Who are the “whole” who “need not a physician”?

And, parallel to this question,

Who are “the righteous”?

The answer to both questions is obvious. Everyone needs a physician because everyone, at one time or another is sick. Thus, there are none who “need not a physician.” By the same token, there are none who are righteous and without need of repentance. Certainly, Jesus knows what Paul knows—how could he not since he, Jesus, is the one who instructed Paul as Paul, himself, testifies.

“But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ... I conferred not with flesh and blood: neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me...”<sup>6</sup>

So, even as the religious leaders question Jesus’ choice of dinner guests, He knows that

There is none righteous,  
no, not one:  
There is none that understandeth,  
there is none that seeketh after God.  
They are all gone out of the way,  
they are together become unprofitable;

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<sup>6</sup> See Galatians 1.<sup>11-17</sup>

there is none that doeth good,  
no, not one.”<sup>7</sup>

Yea, “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that in speaking of the “whole” or “righteous” who “need no physician,” Jesus is speaking of the religious leaders who question his associations. But, after witnessing the brief exchange between the religious leaders and Jesus, no one can take seriously any reading in which Jesus might have actually thought of his questioners as “righteous” and in no need of his healing power. Indeed, the religious leaders’ attitude toward the publican sinners and their belligerent criticism of Jesus bely the reality of their own sinfulness! At the same time, Jesus’ answer makes it clear that in Jesus’ mind the real “righteous,” if there is such a creature, are those deemed to be “sinners.”

### **t**he incredible reversal

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What an incredible act of reversal Jesus has wrought! Jesus has made us rethink what it means to be a “sinner” and what it means to be “righteous.” He has opened a new door and created for us a new role model: the sinner! Turned sinners into heroes. Now, before the reader falls off their chair, or walks off in a huff, hear me out. Let me ask a question.

Tell me, honestly now. After reading the story; after watching Jesus’ easy and intimate association with the publican sinners; after listening to the religious leaders’ self-righteous challenge; after considering Jesus’ reply... After all of this, with whom do you relate—publican “sinner” or “righteous” religious leader?

Let me ask this differently. Who do you want to be in this story? Who do you wish to be like? Whose example do you wish to follow: the publican “sinners” or the “righteous”

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 3.<sup>10-12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Romans 3.<sup>23</sup>

religious leaders?

You long to experience Jesus' welcoming and intimate ministrations. But, for that, you must be in need of a physician. And to be in need of physician means you are not whole. You are a sinner. So, you see, of course you want to be like, numbered among the publican "sinners"! For this story has revealed *them* to be "righteous."

At the same time, of course, you want nothing to do with the "righteous" for they, having no need of a physician miss out on the ministrations of the most remarkable of physicians. How tragic is that!

So, you see, Jesus is doing it again. He is turning the world on its head. And by so doing, Jesus has created for us a new role model: sinners.

Now, don't (intentionally?) misunderstand. We need not purposefully expose ourselves to disease. We need not manufacture sin. It will come sure and steady and readily enough without our even trying. Indeed, we know that "great" are our "weaknesses and liability to sin." Yes, we know that we are "liable to sin continually."<sup>9</sup> We feel deeply the truth that we are "encompassed about" with "temptations and sins." We know that these do "easily beset" us. And when we "desire to rejoice," our "heart groaneth because of [our] sins." "Nevertheless," we "know in whom [we] have trusted."<sup>10</sup>

But it is just such individuals, the admitted sick and confessing sinners, with whom Jesus has cast his lot. Jesus demonstrated this when he began his ministry by being baptized—an ordinance for sinners and the remission of their sins. He demonstrated it in Levi's house. He will show it in his final minutes on earth as he died hanging between two sinners.

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<sup>9</sup> See Lectures on Faith, Lecture 3

<sup>10</sup> 2 Nephi 4.<sup>18-19</sup>

“Man of holiness is his name.” That’s what we were told. It is the truth. A certainty. It’s corollary, “no unclean thing can... dwell in his presence”<sup>11</sup> is less certain. Oh, yes, I suppose that in the long run, in the heavenly city, this may turn out to be true—but only because Jesus will have cleaned up the dirty and healed the sick; for, you see, only ex-sinners dwell there. But in the short term? In the here and now? Well, just have a look! Jesus and publicans and sinners are doing just fine hanging out together, engaging in one of life’s most intimate activities; table fellowship.

As for today? In the here and now? This Man of holiness is at home with acknowledged unholiness. He has come to keep it company while he tends to its illness. And so, he has reversed the fortunes of the sinner, who had previously thought him or herself ostracized, disenfranchised, cast out and cast away. He has, in addition, reversed the fortunes of “the righteous.”

Oh, how he values the sinner! Oh, how the righteous devalue him!

There is simply no doubt. We cannot read the story of Jesus’ ministrations in the house of Levi without wishing to have been there. We cannot help longing for this amazing physician’s ministrations. But, to be so privileged, we cannot imagine ourselves to be “righteous” for they have no need of the physician. To experience his ministrations we must be the sinner.

Though we might feel as Peter, who “fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord,’”<sup>12</sup> today is as good a time as any to boldly confess our sin: knowing that far from denying ourselves his presence, our confession will bear us into the arms of the most caring and skillful of all physicians. Today is as good a time as any to invite others to join us in this act of faith, knowing that Jesus has reversed the perspectives and

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<sup>11</sup> See Moses 6.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Luke 5.<sup>8</sup>



values of a world that resists and denies “the worth of the soul,” which “is great in the sight of God.”<sup>13</sup>

“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.”<sup>14</sup>

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>13</sup> See DC 18.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 1 Timothy 1.<sup>15</sup>

## Part 4—the reversal of beatitude

### Luke 6.<sup>20-26</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

<sup>21</sup>Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled.

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

<sup>22</sup>Blessed 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.

<sup>23</sup>Rejoice y 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.

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

<sup>25</sup>Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger.”

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

<sup>26</sup>Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you!

For so did their fathers to the false prophets.

### Introduction to the series

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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.”<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> DC 18.<sup>10</sup>

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 vis* 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.

Introduction to today’s homily

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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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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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 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

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1. 46-55

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4. 23-30

<sup>4</sup> Luke 5. 27-32

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.”<sup>5</sup>

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 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.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5.<sup>3, 6, 4</sup>

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—they. 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.

**J**esus’ jarring, and beatific, reversal

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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,”<sup>6</sup> 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 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

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<sup>6</sup> 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.”

“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.”<sup>7</sup>

“When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed [“astonished out of measure,” according to Mark] saying, ‘Who then can be saved?’”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> See Matthew 19.<sup>24-25</sup> and Mark 10.<sup>25-26</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> See John 14.<sup>30</sup>



“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.<sup>10</sup>

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.

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,

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<sup>10</sup> Psalm 37.<sup>14, 16</sup>

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 grief<sup>11</sup>—any more than he demands that we be a sinner of the publican sort—though he was made “to be sin for us.”<sup>12</sup> 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

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

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<sup>11</sup> See Isaiah 53.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See 2 Corinthians 5.<sup>21</sup>

“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.”<sup>13</sup>

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.

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

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<sup>13</sup> Luke 1.<sup>52-53</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup>

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!

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<sup>14</sup> DC 58.<sup>8-11</sup>

Part 5—to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little

Luke 7.<sup>36-50</sup>

<sup>36</sup>And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat. <sup>37</sup>And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, <sup>38</sup>and stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

<sup>39</sup>Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, "This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner."

<sup>40</sup>And Jesus answering said unto him, "Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee."

And he saith, "Master, say on."

<sup>41</sup>"There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup>And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?"

<sup>43</sup>Simon answered and said, "I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most."

And he said unto him, "Thou hast rightly judged."

<sup>44</sup>And he turned to the woman, and said unto "Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. <sup>45</sup>Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. <sup>46</sup>My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup>Wherefore I say unto thee, her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."

<sup>48</sup>And he said unto her, "Thy sins are forgiven."

<sup>49</sup>And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, "Who is this that forgiveth sins also?"

<sup>50</sup>And he said to the woman, "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace."

## Introduction to the series

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

This series of homilies 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 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.”<sup>1</sup> In challenging, resisting, and reversing the world’s twisted value system, Jesus surprises us by the individuals with whom he associates and the individuals whom he holds up as role models. He also surprises us by being critical of the sorts of people whom society thinks of as heroic and looks to as role models. We 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 telestial 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.

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<sup>1</sup> DC 18.<sup>10</sup>

In obedience to his Heavenly Father's call, Jesus, in word and deed, resisted and attempted a sort of coup, a reversal of the world's perverted value system that denies the worth of each individual. In our previous homilies, we listened to Mary's awe-inspiring announcement that her son, still in-utero, possessed as one of his central missions a call to reverse the fortunes of rich and poor, mighty and weak, oppressed and oppressor.<sup>2</sup> We watched and listened, surprised, as Jesus taught—and offended—attendees at Nazareth's synagogue by 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.<sup>3</sup>

We watched and listened, breathlessly hopeful, as Jesus stood firm 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 made us bold in confessing, as we must, our sins so that we might partake of his generous ministrations.<sup>4</sup> Finally, we joined multitudes in listening to Jesus' astonishing, gravity-defying Beatitudes in which Jesus reversed our inherited ideas concerning the nature of blessedness and woefulness.<sup>5</sup>

In today's homily, we enter the home of the Pharisee, Simon. With him, we watch, perhaps with some embarrassment, as Jesus generously accepts and appreciates the affectionate kisses and intimate caresses of a strange woman, a woman who is a sinner, a woman guilty of *many* sins. We wonder at his comfort, and wonder if we could ever be so secure as to care for a sinner as Jesus did—and does. We feel the earth convulse and tip under our very feet as he shatters our expectations with his announcement, "to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."

We wonder, what does this mean for those of us who wish to love much?

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<sup>2</sup> Part 1, "A Mother's Intuition: Of the Mighty and Rich, the Low and the Hungry" (Luke 1.<sup>46-55</sup>)

<sup>3</sup> Part 2, "A Prophet's Inspiration: Of Sidonian, Syrian, and Israelite Widows and Lepers" (Luke 4.<sup>23-30</sup>)

<sup>4</sup> Part 3, "Turning Sinners into Role Models and Heroes" (Luke 5.<sup>27-32</sup>)

<sup>5</sup> Part 4, "The Reversal of Beatitude (Luke 6.<sup>20-26</sup>)

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ave you no shame?

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A long, long time ago, in a life that almost seems foreign to me now, I served a proselyting mission in the American New England states. For a brief few months, my companion and I were in the habit of ending our week by stopping by an ice cream store on Saturday night as we headed home to prepared for Sunday. In an attempt, probably, to alleviate our needless guilt at such an unnecessary pleasure, we were sure to do a little proselyting with whomever served at the store's counter, always extending an invitation for them to join us at church the following day.

So it was that one Sunday morning as I sat in a pew awaiting the beginning of services, an older female member of the ward stood at the end of my pew, whispering my name. She had a strange look on her face—something between confusion and embarrassment—as she gave me the come-hither signal with her index finger. She marched back down the aisle toward the chapel door. I followed. Entering the foyer, she pointed at a young woman—the look on the member's face had now shifted to unambiguous disapproval—and said, “She asked for you.”

The young woman who stood in the foyer of the church asking for “Elder Burton” was one who had served my companion and me a few times at the ice cream counter. Whereas she had always dressed in one of those old style white “serving” dresses, today as she stood in the foyer, she had traded the white serving dress for a white halter top and bright red 70's-style hotpants. Suddenly, my heart was racing and my face flushing nearly as bright red as her hotpants.

There was no need to wonder at the time what those who stood around in the foyer thought. I could see it in their eyes, in their posture. “What is such an inappropriately dressed young woman doing standing in the foyer of our church, asking for Elder Burton, no less?”

I am ashamed to say that my sudden embarrassment was not for the young woman but for myself. I didn't think or worry about what was being thought of her. I could only think and worry about what was being thought of me. I didn't think of her potential embarrassment as



it dawned on her that she stuck out like a sore thumb and looked unlike anyone within sight; that this was not how women dressed for Mormon religious services. I couldn't do anything to soften her potential discomfort as I was too engrossed in my own discomfort and needs.

I don't remember what I said or how things played out. I do know that she did not stay for services. And I do remember that my companion and I never again patronized that store to enjoy the pleasure of a couple scoops of ice cream. To this day, she remains a nameless "young woman." A nameless young woman that I failed.

For some time (after I had gotten over my initial selfish worry of being sent home for some obscure and unspecified reason) I felt shame every Saturday night. Every Saturday night I thought of that young woman. I thought of her likely embarrassment that Sunday morning in that foyer. Every Saturday night I thought of my own embarrassment in that foyer and realized that I had then and was now thinking only of myself and never of her—oh, yes, those who "give up" two years and thousands of dollars to voluntarily serve are, so the myth goes, so unselfish.

Had I been more insightful and, more specifically, had I known the scriptures well enough to know the story recounted in today's text, I might have thought in different terms. I might have realized that I was no Jesus. And, worse, that I was, in fact, very little like him. For Jesus, I later came to see in stories such as that found in today's reading, had no shame. He could have and would have been focused on the young woman, establishing and magnifying her worth in her own eyes and in the eyes of those who stood about.

But, in 1975, I felt shame at a perceived impropriety. Simon felt a similar shame in circa 33 AD. But not Jesus. Never. Jesus was in circa 33 AD, as is today in 2021 too busy thinking of the needs of others to worry about himself or what others might think of him. This is but one of the many reasons that Jesus is the unparalleled and perfect Servant and Savior.

The reader might understand my embarrassment as a missionary summoned by a young woman in halter top and hotpants, but perhaps miss the embarrassment that the woman in

today's reading represented for those present in Simon's house. Perhaps we need to slow down a bit. Perhaps, as is so often the case, we need to close our eyes to consider and imagine the scene.

### Who and what manner of woman

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First, we must consider the matter of the unnamed woman, herself. The narrator, Luke, identifies her as an inhabitant of the unnamed city. While we do not know the city, it seems not to have been Jerusalem—Israel's only real megapolis, at least by the standards of the day. The city in which we find ourselves in this narrative is likely small. Everyone knows everyone. This woman is known. And she has a reputation.

It is the narrator that first identifies the woman as "a sinner." He then reports that Simon knew of her reputation: "she is a sinner," the Pharisee thought to himself. He was scandalized that Jesus, one who claimed a closeness with God such as a prophet might possess, seemed undiscerning of the woman's reputation. The woman's status as "sinner," then, was no private affair. Her status as "sinner" seems to have been publicly known and acknowledged. It was likely a matter of public gossip.

Perhaps Jesus had heard the gossip. Or perhaps he possessed the sort of discernment that he exercised in his encounter with the woman at the well—knowing more than he would be expected to know. Either way, Jesus is not ignorant of the woman's sinfulness. He himself agrees with the narrator's and with Simon's assessment of the woman. She is or has been guilty of "sins," plural. And her "sins," Jesus states openly, are or have been "many."

Now, we need not accept the conclusion of some that she was a prostitute. Neither is there any reason to dogmatically reject it. We simply do not know the nature of her "many" sins. But, it seems unwise to minimize her sinfulness. It seems unlikely that her sins were a matter of eating the occasional slice of bacon, eating with unwashed hands, or drinking the occasional caffeinated beverage. It seems unlikely that her sins constituted missing worship

services or failing to provide the temple appropriate tithes and offerings. It seems best to see her possessing attitudes and publicly engaging in activities that could clearly and fairly be interpreted as frequent and repeated unfaithfulness toward God.

As Simon illustrates, this woman is not the type of woman with whom any self-respecting Jew would keep company. No devout follower of the Holy God would invite this sinner to any dinner party. How she even got into Simon's house is a mystery. Who knows, perhaps this unexplained mystery was miraculous—an untold part of the story.

### Caresses, too intimate

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Now, we must consider the behavior in which the sinful woman engaged once she had entered Simon's home . We really must do more than read the evangelist's words. We must visualize them; see them with an "eye of faith."<sup>6</sup> Such seeing is akin to revelation. It is what see-ers do. Anyone can do. It just takes a little courage, a little faith, and a little imagination—a mustard seed's worth. "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets."<sup>7</sup>

What, then, do you see as the woman "began to wash" Jesus' feet? As you seek to see with an eye of faith, keep in mind that in ancient Hebrew culture, "feet" can include everything from the tip of the toes to the knee.<sup>8</sup> How do you feel as you sit in the room and watch the woman of questionable character massage Jesus' feet, ankles, calves, etc.? How would you feel if it were your feet being so fondled? What would others think watching you be so fondled by such a dubious character?

What do you notice when you see that the cleansing agent is the woman's tears? How close does she have to be? How close is her face to Jesus' flesh to have the tears fall on him rather

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<sup>6</sup> See Ether 12.<sup>19</sup> or Alma 5.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 11.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>8</sup> There is no word for calf. "Feet" can represent "ankle," "calf," etc. Some have pointed out, in fact, that "feet" can represent everything from the toes up to and including genitalia.

than be wasted, falling upon the divan on which he reclines or to the flood below? How often does her face touch Jesus' legs? How often do nose, mouth, chin, cheeks, eyelids brush against his skin?

Look, now, as the woman uses her hair, an object of female beauty (think how Muslim women cover their hair in an attempt at modesty), to dry Jesus! Look at the woman's long hair—what color is it, how thick? See how it glides over his skin. Watch it wrap and embrace his feet and legs.

But this is not the extent of this frequent sinner's scandalous behavior. Watch! Throughout her ministrations she affectionately and appreciatively kisses Jesus' feet. Do the kisses reach to the knee? And what do they sound like, these caressing, appreciative kisses?

I don't know about you, but I am relieved when all she is doing is applying a lotion and massaging the lotion into his flesh! The whole thing has made me uncomfortable. In fact, I am willing to bet that you have been squirming a bit as you read this and the previous four paragraphs. I wouldn't be surprised if you found it scandalous to simply imagine the scene. So just imagine how you would have felt to have actually witnessed the original event.

Then, again, add to all this the woman's questionable past.<sup>9</sup> We cannot wonder at Simon's embarrassed response.

“This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.”

**N**ow comes the gravity-defying reversal

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Jesus can see the embarrassment and scandal he has caused his host and dinner guests. He

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<sup>9</sup> If she had been a prostitute, this is all the more scandalous, and insensitive on Jesus' part toward those present.

can see the woman's shame at being the object of such scorn. It is etched on the faces and revealed in the posture of all. Their thoughts are an open book to anyone with discernment. Jesus addresses these embarrassments and shame and begins his reversal with an illustration. A parable.

“There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?”

“Simon answered and said, ‘I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most.’

“And he said unto him, ‘Thou hast rightly judged.’”

Now, speaking in parables might be safe. It might allow the listener to draw their own conclusions. They may or may not draw the conclusions intended by the speaker. But, on this occasion, Jesus was not interested in playing it safe. He had a definite purpose in sharing the parable. He did not wish to risk the point being missed. Therefore, Jesus makes a direct application of the parable to the present circumstances.

Simon invited Jesus to his home but had not gone out of his way to make him welcome or comfortable. He certainly had not greeted him as the woman did. Simon should not be embarrassed by the woman's behavior toward Jesus, but by his own. The woman has demonstrated that she loves Jesus more than Simon. The sinner loves Jesus more than the “righteous.”

We can almost hear Simon's self-justifying rejoinder. “Well, if the sinner loves God so much, why do they sin to begin with? Shouldn't the lover of God resist temptation and sin? Isn't that how one loves God? And, what are you saying, anyway? Should we sin more to love more?”

But Jesus does not address any such ludicrous questions. He knows, of course, what the Psalmist taught (and the Apostle Paul later quoted):

“The LORD looked down from heaven  
upon the children of men,  
to see if there were any that did understand,  
and seek God.  
They are all gone aside,  
they are all together become filthy:  
there is none that doeth good,  
no, not one.”<sup>10</sup>

Yes, “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”<sup>11</sup> So, Jesus knows that Simon is no less the sinner than the woman. He knows that only the most pompously self-righteous ignores the reality that they need not intend, plan, or scheme to sin... and sin again, and again, more and more. He knows how true it is to say that temptation and sin “easily doth beset” us.<sup>12</sup> Sin is everywhere. It will be there to and in our dying breath.

No, Jesus leaves all that aside and lets his reversal stand. It is those who need Jesus most who will make use of him most. “Confessing” sinners love Jesus more than “non-confessing” sinners—the so-called, “righteous.” And this woman, this disrespected and vulnerable woman, this disrespected and vulnerable sinner is just such a woman.

Jesus didn’t come right out and say it. But he may as well have. “Simon, if you would be truly righteous... if you would be one of my true disciples, I would have you be more like this woman, who is a sinner, whose sins are many.

#### Conclusion and benediction

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Whether you call him “God,” “Lord,” “Elohim,” “Yahweh,” “Jesus,” or whatever else, God

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<sup>10</sup> Psalm 14.2-3

<sup>11</sup> Romans 3.23

<sup>12</sup> See Alma 7.15 and 2 Nephi 4.18

has a knack for championing the cause of the underdog. We could be forgiven for concluding that it is in his DNA. It is a central part of his disposition.

He began by choosing Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob—homeless and vulnerable refugees all—as His servants. Servants who would testify of His greatness and power to all the world—a greatness and power demonstrated, in part, by his very choice of weak and vulnerable individuals as his servants. Who better to bear witness of his greatness and power than the weak and vulnerable and powerless who have participated in his greatness and power?

When God moved from calling individuals to choosing an entire nation to proclaim his greatness and power, he settled upon a pack of vulnerable and powerless Egyptian slaves. Israel was to be his ambassador to the nations of this world. On and on it went, on and on it goes... He, choosing the most unlikely candidates as ambassadors of his fame and glory and greatness and power. Paul would later marvel at God's ingenuity in using what was thought to be unusable.

“But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise;

and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

and base things of the world,

and things which are despised, hath God chosen,

yea, and things which are not,

to bring to nought things that are:

That no flesh should glory in his presence....

that, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.”<sup>13</sup>

So, we should not be surprised that among the many present in Simon's home Jesus chooses

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<sup>13</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1.<sup>27-31</sup>

a woman, who “is a sinner,” to serve as witness of God and His character to all who were in the room. We should not be surprised that among the many present in the room it is the woman, who “is a sinner,” that Jesus points to as one who can serve as exemplar for all those who were then present and for all those who would later be present, as we have been today, through the sacred text.

“You can all see for yourselves,” Jesus says. “This woman loves much. She loves much because, having sinned much she has been forgiven much. You could learn much from her.”

And how about you, dear reader. You tell me? Who do you aspire to be? Do you aspire to be Simon or the woman who was a sinner? Will you, from a distance, watch Jesus with noncommittal curiosity? Or will you kneel and weep and wash his feet as you confess the truth: that you are a sinner? Will you love much? Or little? Today is as good a time as any to choose.

*“I love the LORD,  
because he hath heard my voice and my supplications.  
Because he hath inclined his ear unto me,  
therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.  
The sorrows of death compassed me,  
and the pains of hell gat hold upon me:  
I found trouble and sorrow.  
Then called I upon the name of the LORD;  
‘O LORD, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.’  
Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;  
yea, our God is merciful.  
The LORD preserveth the simple:  
I was brought low, and he helped me.  
Return unto thy rest, O my soul;  
for the LORD hath dealt bountifully with thee.  
For thou hast delivered my soul from death,*



*mine eyes from tears,  
and my feet from falling.”<sup>14</sup>*

*Even so, come, Lord Jesus*

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<sup>14</sup> Psalm 116.<sup>1-8</sup>