



Jesus' surprising reversals—part 3 turning sinners into role models and heroes Luke 5.²⁷⁻³²

²⁷And 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."

²⁸And he left all, rose up, and followed him. ²⁹And 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. ³⁰But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, "Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?"

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

Introduction to the series

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

This series of homilies is focused 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

¹ DC 18.¹⁰

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.

Introduction to today’s homily

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.² This reversal of fortunes is epitomized in these lines from her Magnificat.

“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.”³

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,⁴ 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.⁵ 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

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

² Luke 1. 46-55

³ Luke 1. 52-53

⁴ Isaiah 61. 1-2

⁵ Luke 4. 23-30

down with Jesus in table fellowship, one of life's most intimate moments according to the 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...”⁶

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;

⁶ See Galatians 1.¹¹⁻¹⁷

there is none that doeth good,
no, not one.”⁷

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

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.”

the incredible reversal

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” religious leaders?

⁷ Romans 3.¹⁰⁻¹²

⁸ Romans 3.²³

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."⁹ 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."¹⁰

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.

⁹ See Lectures on Faith, Lecture 3

¹⁰ 2 Nephi 4.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

“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”¹¹ 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,’”¹² 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

¹¹ See Moses 6.⁵⁷

¹² Luke 5.⁸

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

“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.”¹⁴

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹³ See DC 18.¹⁰

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 1.¹⁵