

# THE GREAT REVERSAL —

## (1) BLESSED ARE YOU WHO ARE POOR

**Bible Passage : Luke 6:17, 20, 24**

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One of the ways in which I indulged myself over the summer holidays was watching again Ken Burns great series on the American Civil War. There I listened again to the account of the first major battle of the American Civil War. Northerners called it the Battle of Bull Run and southerners, the Battle of Manassas. The battle took place some twenty five miles from Washington and many citizens of the capital came out in their carriages with their picnics to watch the Union army whip the rebels. By mid-morning it appeared that they would get their wish as it seemed the northern army would overwhelm the south. But as the day wore on the tide of battle turned and by late afternoon it was clear the northern armies were not only beaten but they were in full retreat. Indeed the onlookers who had come to watch their heroes were trampled by them as they panicked in retreat. Where once a great victory seemed assured there was a complete rout. It became known as ‘the great skedaddle.’

We could of course look back across history or over our own lives and see countless examples of the same thing. Where things have turned out in a very different way than were anticipated. Or where things ended rather differently than the manner in which they first began. Or where those who were the underdogs, those who had been written off, in fact triumphed. No doubt we will once again hear such stories across the course of the Olympic games.

Whenever we turn to Luke’s gospel we find that this is a theme that he is very interested in. The theme of how things appear now but how they will work out in the long run. The theme of how those who appear to be triumphant now will lose out in the long run. And how those who appear as nothing in the

eyes of the world will in fact be triumphant. Scholars have dubbed this theme in Luke’s gospel the theme of ‘the great reversal.’

Now this theme of the great reversal that he draws our attention to is not some kind of moralising. It’s not some kind of fable such as we find in Aesop’s famous story of the tortoise and the hare. Where the hare, who is a sure thing, loses out to the slow and steady tortoise in a race. And so providing us with all kinds of lessons – slow and steady wins the day, its not where you start its where you finish, it isn’t over until it’s over etc. Nor is it the kind of romanticising that we see in so many films where the champ turns out to be a chump and the geek gets the girl. It’s not simply an uplifting story.

Rather Luke draws our attention to the idea of the great reversal as he draws our attention to Jesus. For Luke the great reversal is the message that lies at the heart of the kingdom that Jesus brings. And running like a thread through Luke’s gospel we find this theme of the great reversal that Jesus brings. Luke presents Jesus to us as a radical, revolutionary figure, who turns our established view of the world right around. So much so that the things we thought really mattered, the way we saw things, are completely over-turned.

One of the places Luke draws our attention to this theme of the great reversal is found in chapter 6. There, in a passage in which takes us right to the heart of the values of his kingdom, Jesus pronounces four blessings accompanied by four woes which help us to see and to understand how things are in God’s kingdom. And to understand the great reversal that He brings.

By the time that we reach chapter 6 Luke has recorded for us a number of instances where Jesus has found Himself in conflict with the Pharisees over healing, His chosen associates and His attitudes to fasting and to the Sabbath. Then in Luke 6:12-16 we witness another of Luke's great themes of how at the crucial moments in His earthly ministry Jesus spent time with His heavenly Father in prayer. And this is indeed a significant moment. For here Jesus appoints His twelve apostles.

This is followed, beginning at verse 17, with a lengthy section of teaching by Jesus. It is sometimes called 'the Sermon on the Plain.' And because much of what we find here is also found in the Sermon on the Mount scholars love to spend their time debating the relationship between the two sermons. That need not concern us. What ought to concern us is the content of what Jesus says as he speaks to this large crowd. (vs 17,19) And we see in this crowd His disciples, those who have come for healing and exorcism, those who have come from the Jewish regions of Jerusalem and Judea – that is town and country – and those who have come from the Gentile regions of Tyre and Sidon.

And in the midst of this scene of a great crowd of diverse people full of expectation and there for many reasons we read that Jesus began to teach His disciples (vs 20). And we will see in a moment that it is important to see that Jesus remarks are directed primarily towards His disciples.

So Jesus begins His teaching by pronouncing four blessings – verses 20-23. But we see that each of these blessings is accompanied by a corresponding woe – verses 24-26. So we see for example in verse 20 Jesus says, 'Blessed are you who are poor.' But in vs 24 He says, 'But woe to you who are rich.'

Now this idea of pronouncing blessings and corresponding woes goes back into the OT. There in Deuteronomy 27, 28 as the Israelites approach the promised land Moses commands them, 'Obey the Lord your God and follow his

commands and decrees that I give you today.' (Deut 27:10). And he tells them that when they enter the promised land they are to divide into two companies. One is to stand on Mount Gerizim and to pronounce the blessings of the covenant upon the people. The other group is to stand on Mount Ebal and pronounce the curses of the covenant upon the people. And we read in Joshua 8 how this then happens. To follow God's law and abide by His covenant will bring God's blessing. To disobey God's law and reject His covenant will bring His cursing.

And it is this biblical pattern that Jesus is bringing before us here. That there is a way to enjoy God's blessing in our lives. But there is also a way in which we will endure God's cursing. Or as Jesus calls it here God's 'woe.' To put it another way there is a way of happiness that comes from being in a right relationship with God and there is a way that is ultimately tragic because we have rejected God. And it is these two opposites that Jesus speaks of here in this series of blessings and woes.

So from the outset we are challenged to think about the life that we are leading. Is it the life that God says will ultimately produce happiness? Or is it the life that will ultimately produce tragedy? Is it the life that God will bless or the life that brings His displeasure? And as we look at these statements we will explore this theme more fully.

The first statement that Jesus makes is in vs 17, 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.' Now as you look at that statement it is obvious that it is part of this idea of the great reversal that Jesus brings. For this is the very opposite of how we think about life. If we substitute that word blessed, for the equally acceptable translation happy, we can see that Jesus is saying something startling, 'happy are you who are poor.' It is a complete reversal of how we think about our lives and about our world.

And indeed it was a complete reversal of how many people thought about poverty in Jesus day. Some of the wealthiest people in Jesus day were the

high-priestly families. And they viewed their wealth as a sign of God's blessing upon them. After all, they argued, the OT was full of examples of how God had given great wealth to His servants such as Abraham, Job and Solomon. Wealth was a sign of God's blessing and the source of happiness.

So when Jesus came along and said, 'Blessed are you who are poor' He was challenging the way that people thought about life and about wealth. And of course He is challenging the way that we look at the world as well.

Yet we must be careful, as we consider these words of Jesus, 'Blessed are you who are poor.' We must be careful not to misinterpret them, as people sometimes do. In the first instance we must be careful not to think that Jesus is teaching that poverty is in itself a good thing. He is not saying, 'It's great to be poor. How happy you must be if you are poor.' The Bible never teaches us that poverty is a good thing. Instead the Bible views poverty as an affliction. Indeed if you look back to 4:18,19 you will see that Jesus message is one of relief for the poor and afflicted.

Secondly, we must be careful not to argue, as some have done, that being poor means that you are especially favoured by God. As such some people have turned poverty into a virtue. They have made the poor highly favoured by God. But that is not a biblical teaching. It is an offshoot of liberal theology and some of its modern successors. It is also why it is important to bear in mind Jesus audience here – His disciples. This is not a general discourse about poverty. But it is Jesus teaching directed towards His disciples.

Thirdly, we must be careful not to make the mistake, as some have done, of thinking that making ourselves poor is the path to God's blessing. That of course has been the path taken by some such as those who have adopted a monastic lifestyle. But again the Bible does not teach us that wealth is wrong and poverty is right.

In other words as we approach this saying of Jesus we must be careful

not to idealise poverty. In my experience those who tend to do so have never experienced poverty. If they had they might be more like the actress who remarked, 'I've been rich, I've been poor. Rich is better.' Jesus is not idealising poverty, so what is He saying?

Well, we must understand poverty in the world of first century Judea. As such we must understand two things. First of all poor did not simply mean economically poor. But someone could be considered poor for a number of reasons – that they did not own land, that they had no education, that they were not religiously upright, that they were a woman, that they didn't have the right family connections etc. Poor meant anyone whose status meant that they were relegated to the fringes of society. And as such they were often regarded as being beyond the pale of God's society. They were regarded as not being fit objects of God's salvation.

And so when Jesus comes and declares in Luke 4:18-19 the words of Isaiah, 'The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And then adds, 'Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' He is saying something truly radical. He is saying that He comes to open the way of salvation to those who are regarded as outcasts in society and outcasts as far as the kingdom of God is concerned. Likewise it is significant that as Jesus begins teaching His disciples there are numbered amongst the crowd both the wealthy from the city and the poor from the countryside, the Jew and Gentile, the healthy and diseased. Jesus is coming to bring salvation to all mankind irrespective of any social distinctions or conventions.

The second thing that we need to understand about the poor in Jesus day is that the poor were often regarded as being godly. To be poor meant that someone lacked resources lacked the advantages of this world. And so they

turned to God as the only one who could supply their need. In the eyes of many the poor were those who expressed a humble dependence upon God.

This attitude is expressed in Mary's song in Luke 1, which is sometimes known as 'the Magnificat.' There she says of God, 'He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.' (vs 52) The word translated 'humble' here is used to refer to those of low social standing. So when Jesus here addresses the poor, poor means those who have nothing and no-one in this life to rely upon so they rely upon God.

In effect in this statement Jesus is saying, 'Blessed are you if you are not relying upon any of the advantages of this life for salvation but are humbly depending upon God.' Jesus tells us that it is this person who enjoys the blessing that comes from God. That it is this person who enjoys that happiness that God alone can bring.

But this is not a call to rejoice in poverty but to rejoice in the fact that as Jesus goes on to say, 'for yours is the kingdom of God.' Here are the real citizens of God's kingdom, those who humbly rely upon God and not the advantages of this world, to bring them into a right relationship with God. It is the message of God's grace. That God's favour does not rest upon those who have all the perceived advantages of this world. Nor are the perceived advantages of this world the ultimate sign of God's blessing. Rather it is those who humbly rely upon God's grace who enjoy His favour. They are the true citizens of His kingdom.

Jesus then goes on to contrast the blessing of those who humbly depend upon God with the woe experienced by the rich of this world. In vs 24 He says, 'But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.'

Now this word woe is not so much a word of condemnation as we sometimes think. It is more an expression of calamity. An expression of coming disaster. And so Jesus is saying 'what a calamity for you who are rich.'

And why is it such a calamity? Because as He goes on to say, 'for you have already received your comfort.' Jesus says if you have gained the wealth of this world and are relying upon the wealth of this world how tragic. For the wealth of this world is only useful for this world.

Now again we must be careful to think about what Jesus is not saying here. Jesus is not teaching that it is wrong to be wealthy. He is not teaching about the evils of wealth. But what He is warning against is the view that wealth somehow brings us status in the eyes of God. That wealth, position or privilege in this life somehow cuts it with God. Jesus says if we think like that it is an absolute tragedy. Because such things belong to this life and do nothing to prepare us for eternity. The person who relies upon wealth and privilege is not relying upon God for salvation. And it is only the person who is relying upon God for salvation who will be saved.

Jesus words, 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.' And the contrasting words, 'But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort' bring us face to face with the great reversal of the gospel. He brings us face to face with how things really are in our world. How things really are in God's eyes.

So what are we to learn here from Jesus statement?

(1) We see that Jesus teaches us here about the relative importance of wealth. In the eyes of our world wealth is everything. And that is what we are encouraged to strive for – wealth and the privileges that wealth brings to us. And probably all of us to some extent buy into that idea. We want wealth and in particular the security that that brings. And of course the status as well.

When we allow ourselves to daydream we dream of wealth and its privileges. The teenage boy dreams of being a rock star or footballer and the lifestyle and status that goes with that. Then about aged forty he stops being a teenager and dreams of making enough money to tell his boss what to do with

his job, retire and have a jet-set lifestyle, free from financial worries. Our dreams are dreams of wealth.

Now as I have said Jesus does not idealise poverty. But He does teach us about the relative importance of wealth. Wealth has its limits. And it is limited to the comforts that it can bring us in this world. Above all we must recognise that wealth does nothing for us in terms of our standing with God. And it is vital that we recognise that. Because it is our standing before God that is of ultimate importance, eternal importance and not our standing in the eyes of the world. For as Jesus warns us we can gain the whole world and yet lose our souls.

There is also much in Jesus teaching in the gospels that challenges us to think about how we use our wealth. Is our wealth used for ourselves to obtain status and security in this life? Or is it used to lay up treasure in heaven? We will only adopt that latter attitude to wealth if we see its relative importance.

So Jesus words challenge us to think carefully about wealth. They challenge us to ask ourselves what it is that we are seeking out of life. Are our goals short-term temporal goals of wealth and status in this life? Or is our great goal entrance in God's eternal kingdom?

(2) Jesus words teach us about the importance of salvation by grace alone. Wealth does not enable us to buy our way into the kingdom of heaven. Instead salvation rests upon God's grace alone. And it is as we cast ourselves upon the grace of God and that alone that we will find salvation.

In our world at large people who think at all about salvation do not really think like that. Instead very often those who are rich in this world believe themselves to be rich towards God. And so we see many who are wealthy become benefactors of the church. They see their wealth as buying them a position of privilege. It is a story that could be told time and time again in the history of the church.

You can see it in the letter of James where the rich expected the seats of honour in the church. You can see it in the patronage of the churches by the aristocracy across the centuries. You can see it in the practice of the medieval church where a wealthy man would give a poor man a meal in return for the poor man taking the wealthy man's sin upon himself. You can see it today in those wealthy churches who refuse to have the message of sin, grace and salvation preached from their pulpits because that is a common and vulgar message that upsets their privileged view of themselves.

But here as Jesus speaks to this mixed group – mixed ethnically, in their expectations, in their wealth, in their social status; and mixed religiously – He preaches the same message – salvation is by the grace of God alone. And it is only those who come to God saying 'nothing in my hand I bring' who will find God's blessing and God's kingdom.

(3) Thirdly Jesus statement brings before us a wonderful message to be proclaimed to rich and poor alike. It is a great message to be proclaimed to the poor. This great message of the salvation that comes to man by the grace of God alone. We do live in a world where many people are crushed by the burden of poverty. Crushed by the burden of being on the margins of society. And often they are people without hope. We see that in the drink and drugs culture. The gang culture. We see it in the soaring suicide rates. In the massive social problems that there are in many places. People with no hope in this world. And no hope for the world to come

But here Jesus offers this wonderful message of salvation. That whilst a person may have nothing in this life, they can become an heir of the kingdom of heaven. They can have an eternal hope that transcends the poverty of this life. That there is a hope of something much greater than the relative wealth of this world.

And it is also a wonderful message to be proclaimed to the wealthy. Because

we live in a world where many, many people experience the emptiness of wealth. They have it all and yet they discover it is not enough. Their lives have a huge void in them. Many people and no doubt many in this relatively prosperous area in which we live tell the same story. They come to the dawning realisation that they have it all – wealth, family, beautiful home, cars, holidays, career etc. – and they are asking themselves is that it?

But the wonderful message of Jesus is that, no that is not it. But if we turn from living for the wealth of this world and turn to God He gives us so much more than the riches that this world can offer. He gives us a life now that is filled with meaning and purpose as we live for Him. And He gives us a hope for the future that goes beyond the relative wealth of this world into eternity.

As God's people we have received this glorious gospel. And it is a glorious gospel not only for us to receive but also to proclaim. For it is a gospel that liberates the people of this world both from poverty and from riches and offers them in Christ a gift that is beyond compare – the kingdom of God itself.

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**Message:** Blessed are you who are poor  
**Series:** The Great Reversal (1)  
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