

## “Reversal of Fortune”

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Micah 6:6-8 + Matthew 5:1-2 = the Beatitudes

Not that long ago there was a company, the darling of MBA programs across the country, wildly profitable, sharing the wealth with employees and stockholders alike. A company where all the interns wished and hoped they could be hired permanently. It was considered the most successful company in America.



This company was riding high, cozy relations with the seats of power, and making fantastic profits in the billions of dollar range. You may have guessed ~ Enron.

Then came the fall, the dramatic reversal ~ a horrific scene, a former VP commits suicide, the CEO is fired in scandal, the company bankrupt, the stock worthless, officers indicted, with whistle blowers from all directions saying “I told you so!”

A company once doing well, but not actually doing good ~ not doing good in Micah’s definition of the good.

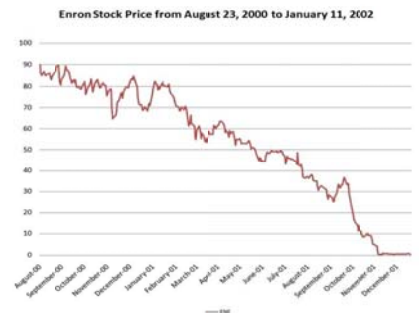
of “doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God”

Enron collapsed in a messy heap, and the tsunami it produced was felt across the nation and indeed around the world.

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great.”<sup>1</sup>

The way God works with humanity is found over and over in scripture: The self-important will inevitably fall, the weak and vulnerable will be raised up. Scripture is absolutely filled with just such dramatic reversals of fortune. a few examples:

- An unremarkable childless couple, well past the age of childbearing, is called by God to go to a far-off



land, becoming parents with heirs more numerous than the stars.

- Those heirs become a slave people. God leads them out of captivity in Egypt and they inherit the land of promise.

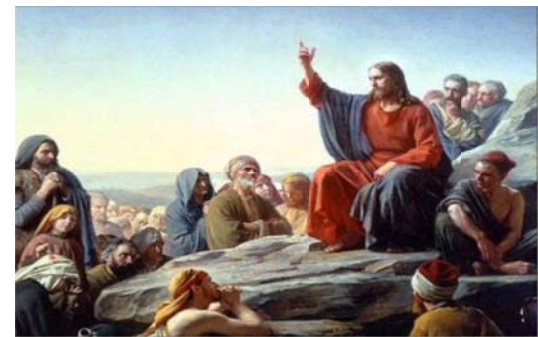


- Later when that same nation falls into moral decay, breaking the covenant, and is sent into exile.

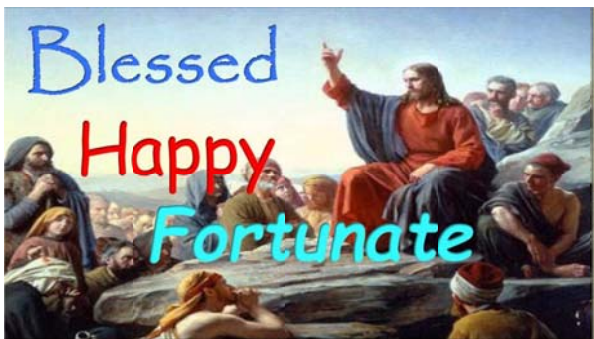
God, our God is in the business of freeing slaves and raising up the humble, but at the same time of bringing down the arrogant, ravenous and those drunk with power.

Jesus in the Beatitudes stands in the same tradition of dramatic reversals of fortunes.

- “Blessed are those who mourn, [Blessed?!] for they will be comforted.”
- “Blessed are the meek, [Blessed?!] for they will inherit the earth.”



The Greek word used here, μακαριοι, can translate “blessed” but it is much more the “fortunate” or “happy.”



Who are the happy ones, the fortunate ones? In ancient Greece, the “blessed ones” were the gods who lived in a state of perpetual satisfaction on a completely different plane from ordinary life ~ no suffering there. In the Greek world below Olympus, the “blest,” the “happy ones” were the elite, the upper crust, the wealthy whose riches and power insulated them from everyday life.

Below heaven in the Hebraic world where Jesus lived, the answer to “who is happy?” follows much the same social divisions. Yet Jesus is a

master of the ironic twist. Jesus purposely uses this word in a totally different way. Jesus dramatically reverses everything, turning the usual way of thinking on its head.

It is not the elite, not the rich and powerful, not the high and mighty, not the people living in the penthouse suite who are the “blessed ones.” Rather Jesus pronounces God’s blessing on the meek and lowly: the poor, the hurting, the hungry, the crying and the despised. These are the persons the world considered cursed. These are Jesus’ people. These are the children of God.

The elite in God’s realm, the “blessed ones” in God’s dream for humanity are those who are at the bottom of the heap. Those at the top of the heap in the present age are in grave danger of falling.

Jesus addresses every one of these Beatitudes to us. For Jesus, God’s realm is specifically for the unfortunate: those in mourning and the meek. But in Matthew’s hearing the kingdom of God is even more for the virtuous in Micah’s definition of virtue:



- those who recognize their own poverty of spirit
- those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
- those who live mercifully
- the pure hearted focused on living God’s way
- peacemakers
- those persecuted because they live God’s way and work to build God’s community

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount can be understood as the Manual of Operation for God’s kingdom. The Beatitudes represent the Preamble, the Basic Principles, the Great Ends, the Way Jesus’ followers are to live. This despite all the setbacks, opposition and resistance this world offers. Jesus is saying directly to us:

**The Sermon  
on the Mount**  
*Part 1*

**Matthew 5:1-12**

“I call you to live your lives out of an alternative vision of reality, call you to live your lives as lives that reverse



the values of this culture. I call you to love your enemy; turn the other cheek; give your possessions to those in need, and to live out radical forgiveness. Be merciful, even as God is merciful. I have come to empower you to forgive others in order that you may model a new way of living in this world.”<sup>2</sup>

**W**ho does Jesus want us to direct this Good News to today? Who are Jesus’ people today? We know with certainty not the self-sufficient rich, not those at the pinnacle in seats of power, those who don’t recognize the source of all real power.



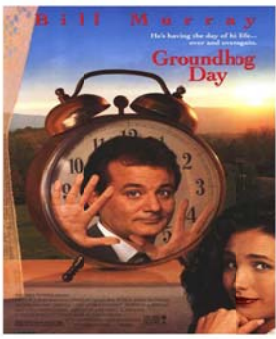
Jesus’ people are the homeless, those on welfare, crime victims, unwed mothers; refugees and the undocumented; soldiers with PTSD, the illiterate, people with McJobs; workers laid off just before retirement; those for whom English is a second language; the unemployed and underemployed hungering and thirsting for real jobs. According to Jesus, these are the blessed ones in God’s realm.

While part of our call certainly is to teach the Enron characters of the world how to do good along with doing well; nevertheless, the Beatitudes demonstrate with crystal clarity that the primary thrust of Jesus’ message is to the margins.

**W**hat’s happening this week? Of course the most important celebration is Thursday, Groundhog Day. It is not just about Groundhog caroling, but more the movie *Groundhog Day* helps us make sense of Jesus’ Beatitudes. You know the story. An obnoxious, egotistical, amoral jerk played to perfection by Bill Murray is caught in a time loop where he has to live the day over and over.



No matter what he does, no matter how much more obnoxious he becomes, no matter how much he rails against heaven, even when he commits suicide, he still wakes up having to repeat the day yet again ~ no exit. He is caught in a hell of his own making ~ a good definition of hell would be to watch all the mistakes of our life flash before our eyes for eternity.



How does he break the cycle? He turns a curse into a blessing. He gradually turns his horrific life into an opportunity to learn from his mistakes and change his behavior. He works hard to improve himself, iteration by iteration until he learns real humility. He stops using the people in his life as means to his personal ends. He learns to imbue every relationship with grace and mercy.

No longer an Enron kind of guy living a life based on lies, manipulation and deception, rather he is transformed into a real *mensch* ~ a real Beatitudes kind of guy. By becoming a blessing, he is blest, blest with release from the time loop cursing his life.

So the story goes. *Groundhog Day* is fiction of course, but this is exactly how living in God's realm works: a reversal of fortunes ~ the unfortunate, the weakest and the most vulnerable, these are the ones truly blest, the humble, the meek and all those struggling to live in God's Way.



These are the truly blessed because God has gifted the kingdom to them.

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 18:2

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Richard Jensen, *Preaching Luke's Gospel* p.82