
Young Child, Wealthy Elite, Despised Tax Collector: Status Reversals on the Approach to Jerusalem (Luke 18:15–19:10)

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Reversals of status and position figure prominently in the Gospel of Luke. This provocative feature of Jesus' mission poses a challenge to individuals outside the disciple group, including critics and opponents of that mission. It also bears on the formation of a community of disciples who are summoned to align their lives and relationships with the pattern Jesus sets for them—signaled already by the inaugural statement in Nazareth (esp. 4:18–19) and the declaration of blessings and woes in 6:20–26. This essay explores the role of status inversion in three episodes toward the close of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem: the embrace of young children as exemplars of God's realm (18:15–17); an exchange with a wealthy elite man, in which disciples are also interlocutors (18:18–30); and an encounter with the wealthy tax collector Zacchaeus (19:1–10).

When empire looks like a young child: Luke 18:15–17

As in Mark, Luke's Gospel presents two scenes in which Jesus points to children as exemplars of the realm of God, each time countering the perspective of the disciple group. In the first instance, Jesus singles out a child who embodies the genuine greatness of participants in God's realm, so redirecting the disciples' competitive—culturally conventional, yet contentious and community-damaging—aspirations for superior status (9:46–48; cf. Mark 9:33–37). Toward the close of the lengthy travel narrative (Luke 9:51–19:44), Luke again contrasts Jesus' embrace of the child and the perspectives of his followers (18:15–17; cf. Mark 10:13–16). Jesus has just appended to a parable about two men at prayer in the temple a pronouncement of radical status inversion: status-seekers are brought low, while those who aim low are exalted (Luke 18:14b). This concern about status and position prepares readers for the ensuing story, in which "they"—presumably mothers—bring *brephe* (infants) to Jesus so that he may touch them, likely for healing or blessing in another form (18:15).¹

1. For the view that mothers are the unnamed custodians of the small children in this passage, see Bridgett A. Green, "Nobody's Free until Everybody's Free: Exploring Gender and Class Injustice in a

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The disciples are less than enthusiastic at their approach. Whatever else their objection, the mission of Jesus will surely not benefit from such a distraction. So, the disciples "began to scold [*epetimōn*] them" (18:15, my translation), whether the infants or the individuals bringing them: strong words!² Jesus' reply is emphatic: "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (18:16–17 NRSVue). What does the realm of God look like? Who belongs in that world? It is not individuals with power, wealth, and privilege, as in the empire that Rome

Story about Children (Luke 18:15–17)," in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, eds. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 291–310 (302–303). For further discussion of children in Luke, see Amy Lindeman Allen, *For Theirs is the Kingdom: Inclusion and Participation of Children in the Gospel according to Luke* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019); John T. Carroll, "What Then Will This Child Become?": Perspectives on Children in the Gospel of Luke," in *The Child in the Bible*, eds. Marcia Bunge, Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gavena (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 177–194.

2. The Greek phrasing in v. 15 is ambiguous: the disciples may be hindering either the infants or the ones carrying them, and they may be seeking to prevent either the children from touching Jesus or (implicitly) the mothers from bringing them to him. However the textual ambiguity of the verse is resolved, the point being emphasized is much the same.

controls, but babies, who are utterly dependent and vulnerable, who exert no control, who occupy the lowest social position. The dominion of God is populated “not by those who are preoccupied with enhancing their status and honor,” but rather by “those whose honor is conferred by God alone.”³ In the topsy-turvy world that God rules, in the Lukan Jesus’ vision of things, *these* are the model citizens of God’s realm.

Luke returns to the correlation of age and status in the last supper discourse in 22:14–38. Once again, the disciples’ quest for honor and position requires correction (22:24–27): rather than seek the honor and power of kings and benefactors, the disciples should seek true greatness in the manner of those who are “young,” those who “serve” (v. 26). This is what authentic leadership looks like. Any who desire to enter the realm of God must do so in the manner and with the claim to status of the young child (18:17). Any who desire to become leaders in the household of God must do so from the position of the youngest (22:26).

Leaving everything to follow Jesus on the way: Luke 18:18–30

Immediately after Jesus asserts that entry into the divine realm is possible only for those who receive it in the manner of a child, a member of the local elite class—a “ruler” (*archōn*)—approaches Jesus with a question about the qualifying conditions that would ensure him an inheritance: What does he need to do “to inherit eternal life”? (18:18). Jesus has heard the question before, though on that occasion the one posing it did so as an adversary seeking to put him to the test (10:25). Here the quest and the question seem sincere; indeed, rather than place a challenge before Jesus, the ruler addresses his query to one whom he acknowledges as a “good teacher.” After deflecting this polite label (only God is good), Jesus recites five Decalogue commands (drawing from Exod 20:12–16; Deut 5:16–20); as in the earlier exchange with a specialist in interpretation of the law, the “doing” needed for (eternal) life is a covenant-keeping obedience to God’s Torah (Luke 18:20; cf. 10:26–28). The ruler, it turns out, has embodied this way of life “from youth” (18:21).

Yet Luke’s readers have already learned that for Jesus, really knowing and doing what the Torah and the Prophets commend entails sharing wealth with those who are impoverished (e.g., the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in 16:19–31). It is therefore no surprise that Jesus ups the ante of Torah fidelity with a challenge to the ruler: “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (18:22 NRSVue). The wealthy ruler seeks a sure inheritance, but Jesus directs him to release wealth to benefit the under-resourced and to relinquish the power he holds in his social world. That is the heavenward path taken by one who follows Jesus.

Does Jesus ask too much? The man is sorrowful (*perilypos*)

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when he hears these hard words (v. 23a), an emotional response that the Lukan narrator explains as due to the ruler’s great wealth (v. 23b). Unlike the parallel scene in Mark, Luke’s story does not relate the departure of the rich man (in contrast to Mark 10:22). Perhaps Luke’s readers imagine him still present when Jesus proceeds to claim that it is no more possible for a person of wealth to enter God’s realm than it is for a camel to navigate its way through the eye of a needle (Luke 18:24–25). Others who are there listening to Jesus (Peter among them) give voice to their dismay: “Then who can be saved?” (v. 26 NRSVue).

Indeed. Who can? Yet Jesus’ daunting command is not the last word; it leaves room for the operation of divine grace. What is humanly impossible is possible for God (v. 27): the “impossible possibility” of salvation even for those encumbered by wealth—and with it, status, privilege, and power.⁴ After an episode in which Jesus restores sight to a man on the roadside near Jericho (18:35–43), Luke goes on to tell the story of another extremely wealthy man who, improbably, makes his way through a metaphorical needle’s eye as salvation comes also to his household.

From tree climber to meal host in the company of Jesus: Luke 19:1–10

Before we are introduced to Zacchaeus, we have met other tax collectors, individuals who have contracted to collect indirect taxes and tolls in service of empire—an occupation that has therefore ostracized its practitioners. In the public eye in Jericho, Zacchaeus has two strikes against him: he is not only a tax collector but, as a *chief* tax collector in the region, also wealthy. Make it three strikes against him: he is also unusually short of stature.⁵ As the story unfolds, it is evident that Zacchaeus, despite his wealth, is a socially marginalized and despised resident of the town (19:7). Yet earlier encounters between Jesus and tax collectors have invariably led to positive outcomes. They may be among community outsiders as

4. On the “impossible possibility” embodied by the wealthy Zacchaeus’s response to Jesus, see Carroll, *Luke*, 365, 373.

5. For a probing discussion of Luke’s characterization of Zacchaeus, as a little person, as one that counters pejorative, physiognomically shaped cultural perceptions, see Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2006), 97–108.

3. John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 362.

“sinners,” but when Jesus embraces them and extends to them his call to follow him, they do so unreservedly (5:27–32; 15:1)—just as they had responded enthusiastically to the prophetic ministry of John the Baptizer (3:12–13; 7:29).

In this episode, the intersection of wealth (an impediment to participation in God’s realm, as we have already discovered) and marginalization by occupation (a ticket of entrance into the disciple community) plays out in an intriguing way, especially in the light of the preceding exchange between Jesus and the rich ruler. In the case of Zacchaeus, inside-out reversals (sinner and righteous) and upside-down reversals (rich and poor) coincide. After becoming aware that Jesus and his entourage are passing through Jericho, Zacchaeus desires to see him but crowd size and his own diminutive size conspire to thwart the quest. Unafraid of appearing ridiculous, though, Zacchaeus runs ahead and climbs a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus (19:4). The man up in a tree has not elevated himself (status-wise) but just the opposite. He is primed for a visit from the Messiah. And so it goes. Jesus urges the rich tax collector to hurry down from his perch and host him in his home, “for I must stay at your house today” (v. 5). Verses 6 and 7 contrast the emotional responses of Zacchaeus and the observing public: joyful hospitality versus indignant grumbling.

Against the backdrop of community ostracization, verse 8 reports Zacchaeus’s response: “Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, ‘Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much’” (NRSVue). Much ink has been spilled over the present-tense verbs “give” (*didōmi*) and “pay back” (*apodidōmi*) in this sentence. Is Zacchaeus defending his honor, and his ethical deportment even as a tax collector, for this is his customary practice?⁶ Or, as in the NRSVue translation quoted here, do the present-tense verbs have a future nuance, for the wealthy tax collector commits himself to a future practice of radical generosity toward the poor (to the extent of half of his possessions) and fourfold restitution to anyone he has defrauded?⁷ Given the narrative arc to this point in Luke’s Gospel, with recurring scenes of inside-out status reversal in which Jesus welcomes sinners, acceptance that then prompts moral transformation, the latter reading seems preferable. On either interpretation, however, Jesus pronounces the presence of “salvation” in and for “this household,” as the socially marginalized outsider is restored to a place of honor within the community of Abraham’s children (v. 9).

Picking up the refrain from 5:32, spoken at another tax collector’s home (Levi’s), Jesus concludes with a mission statement. Zacchaeus is not the only character in this episode who is on a quest; if he sought to see Jesus, Jesus “came to seek out and to save

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the lost” (v. 10). Salvation also happens here, in the household of this wealthy tax collector: the humanly impossible has occurred. Will the witnessing, neighboring public, so inclined to judge and reject Zacchaeus, experience their own conversion of imagination (*metanoia*) so as to welcome him as one of their own, among the people of Abraham? How will Luke’s readers respond? Since the story gives Jesus the last word (in vv. 9–10), the question is posed also to us: will we resist or instead embrace and further his mission of restoring all who have lost their way, all who have been excluded from the community?

Status inversion in the mission of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel

The interplay among the three episodes explored in this essay highlights the intersectionality of concerns with multiple markers of social status, position, privilege, and power. Luke pictures Jesus’ mission as one that favors, that confers blessing on individuals who are low in status and power—in this part of the narrative, small children and the mothers who (implicitly) bring them to Jesus. Luke paints a stark contrast between the infants in 18:15–17 and the wealthy elite man in vv. 18–25. Jesus offers the very young as exemplary participants in God’s dominion, while the rich ruler who longs for assurance of a share in eternal life instead stumbles when the invitation to follow Jesus is joined to an imperative to distribute wealth for the sake of the impoverished. While the ending of this rich man’s story lacks closure (his departure is not reported: does he eventually follow?), the nearly adjacent narrative of Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus shows that in the company of Jesus even very wealthy individuals can come to embody values, commitments, and practices that mark them as true descendants of Abraham, people who enjoy the salvation that God’s reign brings “today.”

Although this essay has considered only three vignettes in Luke’s account of the mission of Jesus, the status inversion on display in these scenes is a characteristic feature of the wider narrative. Indeed, Mary’s Song (the Magnificat) in 1:46–55 already prophetically anticipates this theme. With the expected advent of John (the Baptizer) and Jesus (the Messiah), Mary celebrates the divine initiative to bring salvation to Israel and portrays it in terms of radical reversal:

6. See, e.g., Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000), 150–52; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke*, Sacra Pagina 3 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 285–287.

7. See e.g., Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 277; Carroll, *Luke*, 372–373.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination
of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
(1:51–53 NRSVue)

Jesus is quick to embrace this vision of God’s saving intervention in the world. His inaugural mission statement makes clear his Spirit-empowered commitment to proclaim good news to the poor and release to all who are oppressed and suffer from impairing conditions (4:18–19, taking a cue from Isa 61:1–2a and 58:6). Fresh from a prayer-tutored selection of twelve apostles (Luke 6:12–16), Jesus then sketches in some detail the pattern of life and relationships of the disciple-community he has begun to form (6:20–49). He opens the discourse with a vivid picture of the status inversion that the reign of God portends, or rather is creating: blessing for “you poor,” to whom the realm of God belongs, for “you who hunger,” for “you who weep,” for “you who are [despised and persecuted]” (vv. 20–23). As for their opposites, “you” who now enjoy wealth and bounty, laughter and public honor, the boon of life’s goods has been exhausted (vv. 24–26). Dramatic enactment of this set of reversals comes in due course with the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (16:19–31), one of those fictional stories that is hauntingly true to reality in both first and twenty-first centuries. Jesus flips the script: the ones who are last take first place in God’s dominion, while those who enjoy first position are now last (13:30).

To these upside-down status inversions (among other instances in the narrative), Luke adds recurring inside-out reversals in which righteous and sinner, secure and lost, exchange places (e.g., 5:27–32; 7:36–50; 15:1–32; 18:9–14; cf. 23:39–43). Who is

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inside? Who belongs in God’s household, in God’s realm? Regardless of station, whatever the past life path, there is room for any and all who accept Jesus’ invitation and the new way of life it opens. Boundary-transgressing status reversal extends beyond Jewish communities when Samaritans—even after the expected hostility in 9:52–55—begin to receive favorable mention (10:30–35 and 17:11–19, preparing for Acts 8), and when Jesus restores a severely impaired Gentile to health and life (Luke 8:26–39; cf. the images of Gentile inclusion in 2:29–32; 4:23–27; 13:23–30).

The cultural-script-defying status inversions on display in Jesus’ words and actions—his praxis of God’s reign in the world—touch his own person as well. The one who was crucified as a “righteous one” (*dikaïos*, 23:47) went to death as one associated with the “lawless” (22:37). His messianic “rule” entailed rejection, suffering, and execution, yet God’s purpose for his life moved beyond crucifixion to exaltation—as Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36).

A strange empire, this, in the world over which Rome appears to hold sway—as with so many “Romes” in the centuries since.