

## **BEING BLESSED: An upside-down look at faith from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount**

by Shaun Groves

Originally written as an overview of the beatitudes to familiarize media with the material the album White Flag was based upon.

As I studied the beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) for the first time, I tried to transport myself to the mountainside where they were first taught: His name had echoed through villages. "Yeshuah," the Jews whispered. "Could this man from that hillbilly town Nazareth be the Messiah the prophets promised us 400 years ago? What is He like? What does He want?"

A crowd gathers, and the ordinary looking man at the center of everyone's attention sat like a rabbi and taught the curious and skeptical and hopeful Jews and disciples what it would mean to follow Him. They expected a general concocting a plan for world-domination or at least the foundation of a Jewish nation. They expected a King, stately and majestic, freeing them from the bonds of Roman rule, insuring them a life of prosperity safety. Instead, they got eight blessings from a man who looked just like them and lived upside down.

### ***MATTHEW 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."***

Jesus addressed the spectators scattered on the hillside. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he announced. How strange. How seeker insensitive of Him. This is His first opportunity after all to make a good impression on such an enormous number of potential converts, a multitude of spiritual seekers. Why start like this, with poverty? He might as well have said, "You're a loser. There's nothing good in you, and you have nothing of value to offer me or anyone else. You're worthless inside."

And well, that's what He meant. The first step in being a disciple of Christ, the thing we must know first is not, "God loves you and has a plan for your life." That's true: God loves us no matter how messed up we are. But **apparently what Jesus wants us to know first is just how messed up we are. Perhaps that's because love is more precious when we understand how little we deserve it.**

I watched Billy Graham on Larry King Live shortly after teen gunmen had slaughtered their classmates in Littleton, Colorado. Larry was racked by the same question that kept so many millions up at night, "Why did this happen?" And as Reverend Graham paused to collect his answer, I raised my hand at home, ready to rant. I just knew it was Marilyn Manson, video game violence, MTV, absent fathers... That was the list evangelical America had raised me to recite at moments like this. The problem, it had been taught to me, was always out there in "the world," in need of legislation or a good boycott. But Billy Graham, much wiser than I, seemed to hear me and calmly explained what's wrong with the world, "Thousands of years ago, a young couple in love lived in a garden called Eden, and God placed a tree in the Garden and told them not to eat from the tree..." As it turns out, the world is not what's wrong with me. I'm what's wrong with it.

I'm poor in spirit, and there was nothing good in me when I entered the world, incapable of thinking and acting rightly. My heart's twisted, torn, tempted. And aren't we all. For all have sinned and don't come close to measuring up to God's perfection. As Calvin wrote, "He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit." [Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, I, by John Calvin (1558: translated by William Pringle, 1845: Eerdmans, n.d.) p. 261] So I pray to God with him... *"Nothing in my hand I bring/Simply to thy cross I cling/Naked, come to thee for*

*dress/Helpless, look to thee for grace/Foul, I to the fountain fly/Wash me, Saviour, or I die.”*

***MATTHEW 5:4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”***

And the warm fuzzies kept flowing from Jesus as He continued to charm the crowd with His blessings. He “encourages” them with, “Blessed are those who mourn.” “Who is this guy? When do we get to the killing the Romans part or the riches beyond our dreams part?” His listeners must have wondered.

But Jesus blesses the mourning. This is not a shed tear over the loss of a loved one or a job. It is the deep, soul-shattering lament over the loss of righteousness, the death of our innocence. This sadness because of our poverty of spirit. [The Message of the Sermon On The Mount, John R. W. Stott [Inter-Varsity Press 1978] pp. 40-41.]

When I was 6, an East Texas pastor screamed at me from his pulpit, “When you leave this church this morning! You - could get hit - by a truck. A TRUCK! And if you don’t know Jeeeeesus! That truck’s gonna send you straight to hell! STRAIGHT TO HELL!!” I had no idea the church parking lot could be so perilous, so I ran down the aisle before the choir and organ cranked up. I filled out a 3x5 card with one of those midget pencils made only for the miniature hands of six-year-olds and golfers: I NEED JESUS. And for the next 30 minutes, I just added exclamation marks as if to say with each one, “I really do! I’m scared of trucks! Help me Jesus!” Then the music stopped, and the pastor gave me a Bible and a lot of old ladies came by afterwards to hug and kiss me, which scared me more than little. And then my family took me to Luby’s, and we had steak.

I got saved. American style.

I put Jesus, my life vest as the preacher had called Him, in the closet in case I ever needed Him. But when I was 12, it looked like my parents might divorce, I had few friends, I was constantly bullied and perpetually lying to win approval and appear more important or smart than I was. I was looking at pornography with my friends and stealing anything I could sell for money. I was feeling guilty, depressed, thinking about suicide often and getting worse. I felt the water rushing in around my ankles. I struggled against sin’s tide in me. I mourned. I lamented my depravity, my selfishness, my hopelessness. I cried out a 12-year-old version of Paul’s plea, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”(Romans 7:24). And I clung, for the first time, to the cross like it was more than a symbol or a story. I held on like it was air for my suffocating soul, my only chance of staying afloat, of living, because it was. He is. I knew then what I was being saved from: me. Jesus is more than the promise of Heaven. He is more than safe passage in a world of trucks.

***MATTHEW 5:5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”***

Jesus continued, “Blessed are the meek.” Mourning leads us here. Jesus, tethering this radical new belief system to the ancient faith His Jewish audience was familiar with, often links His blessings to familiar passages from their Old Testament scriptures. In this case Jesus promises the meek will “inherit the land,” and the crowd recognized this phrase from Psalm 37:1-11 where David described the character of those who will inherit the new world to come. They are people, David sang, who trust God so whole-heartedly that they fear no man, are not angry, do not worry and are teachable and obedient.

The meek become this way, so other-worldly, because they “commit” their way to the Lord, David says. The Hebrew word for “commit” in Psalm 37 in Hebrew means “to roll.” We roll our poverty onto the wealth of God’s grace, our anger onto the justice of the Judge of men, and our worry onto the generous and capable hands of our Father. We surrender to One greater than us and all our sin. And Jesus says this commitment, this surrender, is essential to becoming a disciple of the Messiah. It’s what mourning moves us to do with our impoverished spirits. “The way to rise in the kingdom,” as Charles Spurgeon taught, “is to sink in ourselves.” [The Gospel of the Kingdom, by C. H. Spurgeon (Passmore and Alabaster, 1893). P.21] The only hope for the sinful and sad, turns out to be resignation, admitting their sin and sadness and giving it up to the Messiah. Only faith that begins this way is true faith at all. [Søren Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1938), p. 67]

***MATTHEW 5:6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.”***

This kind of surrender to God transforms our human heart. The Spirit of God moves into us and gives us a spiritual appetite we lacked before (Ezekiel 36:26-27). All Christians have been given a hunger that cannot be satisfied by the material but only the spiritual, a rightly lived life.

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Blessed are those who feel weighted down and discontented by the peddled ambitions of this world. Blessed are those who realize the American dream is only a scheme inevitably tethering them to a mundane and self-absorbed existence. Blessed are those who shake a fist in the face of advertisers, educators, politicians, religious fanatics, lovers and tempters of all shapes and sizes and shout, “You can’t give me what I crave! Nothing but righteousness can fill me up.”

***MATTHEW 5:7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”***

The problem is, after we’re done fist shaking and yelling that declaration, we still don’t know what “righteousness” means. And I suspect the Jewish audience taking in the blessings of Jesus 2,000 years ago didn’t either. Growing up there were rules for how long my hair could be, what color it could be, what I could wear, listen to, how loud I could listen, what I could watch and who I could watch it with... So many rules prompted by good intentions but not written on tablets of stone or by the hand of God. No wonder when I read the word “righteousness” for the first time here in Matthew I had no idea what exactly we were supposed to hungering and thirsting for. What does righteous living look like?

Jesus, knowing I’d ask this, defines righteousness simply with His next three blessings. “Blessed are those who show mercy,” He begins. If I want to be righteous, to follow Jesus, I can’t pass by the wounded on the other side of the street. I have to stop, stoop and dress the cuts regardless of the wounded’s stature, smell or the cost to me. I have to do more than write a check and say a prayer, more than turn the poor and battered of this world over to a political party or government program. It’s my job to play basketball with a fatherless kid, teach him to read, give his mom a dress or a job or a meal. Righteousness is then, first of all, defined by Jesus as meeting the needs of people.

I’ve heard the story of the good Samaritan hundreds of times by now. You’d think I’d know Jesus doesn’t want hollow religion, He wants mercy showing. And yet three years ago when a woman was cursed and kicked around the yard across the street, I stood still in my yard. I was

scared. She was filthy, and I knew her bad decisions and bad company were to blame for her bruises. I was tempted to say, “Serves her right. Sinner.” I was religious and not merciful.

And this is odd too considering my own story. When I was a kid, we had a hard time paying the bills sometimes. I’d pray for food and for the bank not to take our house. Unanswered. No groceries came, no word of encouragement brightened the day, no money was slipped into our mailbox. I know what it’s like to need mercy, to be angry at God and His people for not giving me any, and yet I’m still not quick to give it. We are surrounded by the sick in need of aid, prayers in need of answers. **Blessed are those who become the hands of Heaven stretched out to the lowest and least. Blessed are those who lavish upon others the mercy poured out on them by God.**

***MATTHEW 5:8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”***

The more I studied mercy showing, the more I wondered why I didn’t do more of it. I wanted to, but mysteriously I just didn’t. Then the answer came. I slumped convicted in my chair reading the words of Luther screaming to me, “The command to you is not to crawl into a corner or into the desert, but to run out, if that is where you have been, and to offer your hands and feet and your whole body, and to wager everything you have and can do.” He says this kind of abandonment to mercy showing requires a hunger for righteousness “that can never be curbed or stopped or sated, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except accomplishment and maintenance of the right, despising everything that hinders this end.” [The Sermon On The Mount by Martin Luther (1521: translated by Jaroslav Pelikan: in vol. 21 of Luther’s Works, Concordia, 1956, p.27]

Luther seemed to be saying that the reason I couldn’t get past hungering and thirsting for righteousness to actually *do* righteousness was that I wasn’t pure of heart.

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” said Jesus. A heart is kept from showing mercy when its allegiance is divided between righteousness and anything else. Soren Kierkegaard believed being pure of heart is “to will one thing” [Søren Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1938)]. We are to seek first and foremost the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). But seeking God’s way above all is so hard for me. I haven’t been raised with that understanding of Christianity. I’ve been led to believe that salvation is primarily about God coming down to fix me and help me and prosper me. I’ve been believing His focus is my life, not that my life is to be focused on Him.

***MATTHEW 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”***

Then Jesus tells the gathering of Jews, who also knew what it was like to live out their faith in fear of the Romans, “Blessed are those who make peace.” Later in the Sermon on the Mount He elaborates, adding that we should pray for persecutors (Matthew 5:44), meet their needs (Luke 6:27,28, Romans 12:20), carry their load farther than we’ve been asked (Matthew 5:41), not punch back (Matthew 5:39, Luke 6:29), and allow them to strike and humiliate us if we can’t run away (Matthew 5:38-40). And for three centuries after these words were spoken, the Church believed Jesus meant it. They believed and taught that this command to be nonviolent and even kind to those who harm us and hate us applied as much to the treatment of an irritating next door neighbor or schoolyard bully as it did to Roman soldiers intent on raping, torturing and killing the innocent.

Jesus teaches us to love our enemies as they we were loved by God (Matthew 5:48). Elsewhere He warns that those drawing the sword will die by the sword (Matthew 26:52), and

He gives us hope by promising a day when lions will lay down with lambs and swords will be bent (Isaiah 2:3). We're promised that eternal peace will break out. Until that day He teaches us to pray for and serve the backstabber in the office, the smart-mouthed teenager in our house and the candidate from the other side of the aisle. I was an enemy of God deserving to be punished with death, but instead He met my greatest needs and calls me His friend. Doing the same, when I want to hate and hurt, is yet another component of righteousness crucial to being blessed by Jesus. It is being perfect as my Father in Heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

I have to raise an eyebrow at this Yeshuah person and ask, "Don't you know what will happen to me if I live like this? If I don't fight back from time to time? If I don't assert myself and put evildoers in their place?" Of course He answers these questions of mine from a cross where he hangs shredded like a war-worn flag, "Forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. It is finished." The war is over.

***MATTHEW 5:10-12 "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."***

The faces on that hillside 2,000 years ago must have been etched with a mixture of anger and bewilderment at this point in Jesus' sermon. Just like mine was when I studied it for the first time. Poverty, mourning, surrender, showing mercy to trashy people, severing ties, and now being kind to those brutes the Romans? This is no way to win a crowd.

Then Jesus goes one step further and issues his most repulsive blessing yet. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness." He promises that if we follow Him we will be persecuted, a word that means to be pursued with intent to physically harm or kill. I've spent my life lowering the bar in the name of "seeker sensitivity" and widening the way for "relevance" sake. Until studying the beatitudes I never noticed Jesus unapologetically doing the opposite, the illogical. I've invested countless hours in making my faith easier for others to follow in order to increase the numbers of converts or my profits. But here Jesus blesses those who will bleed and cry because they follow Him. That's the price tag for righteousness. The way is too narrow to ever be popular or safe. Following Christ means, in part, following in His footsteps knowing they may lead us to our own Golgotha.

I've learned to love these blessings from Jesus. Like the Jews they were spoken to, I don't want this kind of a Messiah or this kind of religion. It's not as happy or easy as one I'd make up for myself. But I've given these words a chance, studied them, tried to live them. And I'm more convinced today than ever before that they're true and capable of making me something truly alien, something beautifully peculiar. If we all followed them, we could become that city on a hill so hard to ignore. People could one day say about us "...they renounce every right of their own and live for the sake of Jesus Christ. When reproached, they hold their peace; when treated with violence they endure it patiently; when men drive them from their presence, they yield their ground. They are determined to leave their rights to God alone." [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost Of Discipleship*, New York, MacMillan, 1959, p.109]

Be blessed.