

## NARROW

By Shaun Groves

*The article below is an abbreviated form of a sermon series Rocketown recording artist Shaun Groves taught last fall at IKON, the college/career group he leads at his home church in Franklin, Tennessee. These concepts from the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) also reflect the thematic direction of his upcoming third album, White Flag, due to release July 12.*

### Matthew 5:3-12

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

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."

Jesus addressed the massive gathering of 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 to make a good impression on such a massive crowd of potential converts. This is their first, and for some their last, taste of what the Messiah is like and what it will mean to follow Him. 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," as I was always taught. That's true, but apparently, according to Jesus, what God wants us to know first is that we are nothing without Him. There is nothing good in us, any of us.

And the warm fuzzies kept flowing from Jesus as He continued to charm the crowd. He "encourages" them with, "Blessed are those who mourn." 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.

I watched Billy Graham on Larry King Live shortly after teen gunmen had slaughtered their classmates and injured many more. Larry was racked by the same question that kept so many millions up at night: "Why did this happen?" And as Rev. Graham paused to collect his answer, I raised my hand at home. I just knew it was Marilyn Manson, video game violence, MTV, absent fathers, etc. That was the list evangelical America had raised me to recite. The problem, it had been taught to me, was always out there in the world, in need of legislation or a good boycott. And Billy Graham, much wiser than I, looked Larry in the face and explained, "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 the world.

When I was 6, an East Texas pastor screamed at me from his pulpit, “When you leave this church and head to your car you could die! You could step out in front of a truck and meet Jesus today! And if you’re not a Christian, you’ll go to hell!!” I had no idea the church parking lot could be so dangerous, but I wasn’t taking my chances. I walked down the aisle, filled out a 3x5 card saying I wanted to be a Christian and felt safer in a world with trucks. Someone gave me a Bible and a lot of old ladies came by afterwards to hug and kiss me, which was a little strange, and then my family took me to Luby’s to have a steak. I got saved, American style.

I put salvation, my life vest, in the closet in case I ever needed it. 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. 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 my only hope of staying afloat, of living, because it was. I knew then what I was being saved from: me. And I cling to Jesus harder today having realized that I am worthless without Him, that I truly need Him for more than truck insurance.

And so Jesus continues, “Blessed are those who are meek.” Mourning leads us here. Jesus, tethering this radical new belief system to the ancient faith His audience was familiar with, often links the beatitudes to familiar passages from Old Testament scriptures. In this case Jesus says the meek will “inherit the land,” and the crowd recognized this phrase from Psalm 37:1-9 where David described the character of those who will inherit the new world to come. They are people who trust God so whole-heartedly that they fear no man, are not angry, do not worry and are teachable and obedient.

The meek became this way when they chose to “commit” their way to the Lord, David says. The Hebrew word for “commit” means “to roll.” It’s taking our sin, frailty and flaws, immense and heavy, and rolling them into the capable hands of our God. And Jesus says this commitment, this trusting surrender, is essential to becoming a disciple of the Messiah. It’s what mourning moves us to do with our impoverished spirits.

And surrender transforms the human heart from stone to flesh and makes it a slave to the Spirit of God who moves us to obey His commands (Ezekiel 36:26, 27). Now the surrendered person has a new desire that competes with the old. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” And all followers of Jesus do

crave more than the life they lived before Christ. Now they hunger for right living and right thinking called righteousness.

The problem is we don't know what "righteousness" is. And I suspect Jesus' Jewish audience 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 and much more. So many rules that did not come from God but from men with good intentions. But it left me confused, as confused as an ancient Jew living under the laws of the Pharisees, about what exactly "right" was. I had no idea what rules, if any, were important to God? What is righteousness?

And so Jesus, knowing I'm stupid, makes it simple. He defines righteousness. "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 wounds. 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 kid of another color, teach him to read, give his mom a dress or a job or a meal. Righteousness is meeting the needs of people.

"Blessed are those who are pure in heart," Jesus continues. Righteousness is tied to the motives and inclination of the heart. If I do good to look good, I'm not righteous, I'm selfish. I'm divided between benevolence and applause. I'm allegiant to my approval rating, the sales spike from a press release, the smiles of the religious and not to God alone. I am trying to serve two masters and not satisfying either.

Then Jesus tells the gathering of Jews, forever under the thumb of violent oppressors and abusers, "Blessed are those who make peace." Later in the Sermon on the Mount He elaborates, adding that we should pray for our accusers, meet their needs, carry their load farther than they've commanded us to, not hit them back, and allow them to strike and humiliate us without end. 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. We are 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 need and calls me His friend. And doing the same, when I want to hate and hurt, is righteousness crucial to following Jesus.

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. And, to be honest, He had irreparably ruined his chances of a large altar call or good merchandise sales.

Poverty, mourning, surrender, showing mercy to the trash of this world, severing ties with it as well, and now being kind to those brutes the Romans?

Then Jesus issues his most repulsive blessing yet, the one that will insure Him a low popularity rating. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.” He promises that if we follow him in the seven ways just described, we will be persecuted, a word that means to be pursued with intent to physically harm or kill. We can be certain that a life beginning with admitted poverty and eventually dedicated to mercy showing, allegiance cutting and peace making will cost us greatly. It seems that while we in Christian ministry/industry focus so much on lowering the bar and widening the way in order to increase the numbers of converts, amount of revenue, and acceptance of our faith, Jesus does the opposite. He makes sure the thousands listening to Him then and today realize His way is narrow and the bar is too high to attract and please the masses.

Today is a good day for me. I’m finding it easy to walk this road Jesus has mapped out for us. I feel strong and eager to pay any price for obedience to Him. But yesterday the wounded in need of mercy were just too far out of my way—I had more pressing things to tend to. And tomorrow I may cross paths with an enemy who is too conniving for me to care and pray for, someone too hurtful for me to forgive. And much of the time, I must admit, I find myself stumbling clumsily down this road instead of running confidently. My dedication wavers, my willingness to take the next step wears thin. It’s hard, and I’m stuck somewhere between poverty and persecution.

This causes me to think of the beatitudes, this corridor to Christ-likeness, as a funnel that grows more and more confining and difficult to traverse as we walk it. Millions stand at its wide opening and readily admit they are flawed. Many of those, but not all, will stop to mourn and regret their wickedness in our upbeat and positive culture. Many of those, but not all, will roll that shame and sadness into the strong grasp of Jesus. Many of those, but not all, will spend their life chasing after something more than an SUV and a house in the suburbs. Some of those, but not all, will see the needs around them and stop to help, live like a citizen of Heaven and not earth, and pour love and not hate on those who mean them harm.

These words of Jesus preached from an ancient mountainside transform our faith today into an often unwanted and difficult product to sell the masses. If followed they might lead us to failure and not success as defined by the marketplace. And if obeyed they make for a sometimes difficult and dangerous life characterized by poverty, scorn, bruises and even death. This way is life, Jesus reassures us. But this way is narrow.

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