



The Church of the Beatitudes is built on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. The church is octagonal, representing the eight beatitudes in Jesus' sermon.

The Sermon on the Mount

An Overview

At the high-water mark of Jesus' early ministry, He drew a large group of people and began to teach them—near the crest of the mountain. This would *change history forever.*

By Joseph R. Cathey

THE SERMON ON THE Mount (Matthew 5-7) is one of the best-known and yet most complex sermons that Jesus preached to His followers. The sermon has received wholehearted praise—even from non-Christians such as Mahatma Gandhi in his struggles with the British Empire and civil disobedience.¹ Interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount are legion in their existence. “One recent survey has itemized thirty-six different interpretations” of what Jesus actually meant when He preached this sermon.² While exploring in depth the roots and contextual meanings of the Sermon on the Mount would be fascinating, space will not permit such an undertaking.

Setting

Let us first examine the location and terrain where Jesus preached His Sermon on the Mount. Scholars believe the crowd gathered to hear Jesus' sermon on a hillside overlooking the upper northwestern corner of the Sea of Galilee.³ (See map, p. 50.) If this location is correct, then Jesus preached this sermon not far from Mary Magdalene's home and directly across from the scene of the Gadarene demoniac and the ensuing mass swine drowning. Evidence dating to the fourth century A.D. indicates that some Christians believed this particular place was indeed the location for the sermon.⁴

The setting would have afforded Jesus both a height to look out over the upper end of the Sea of Galilee as well as a view southwards toward the sloping landscape. The location

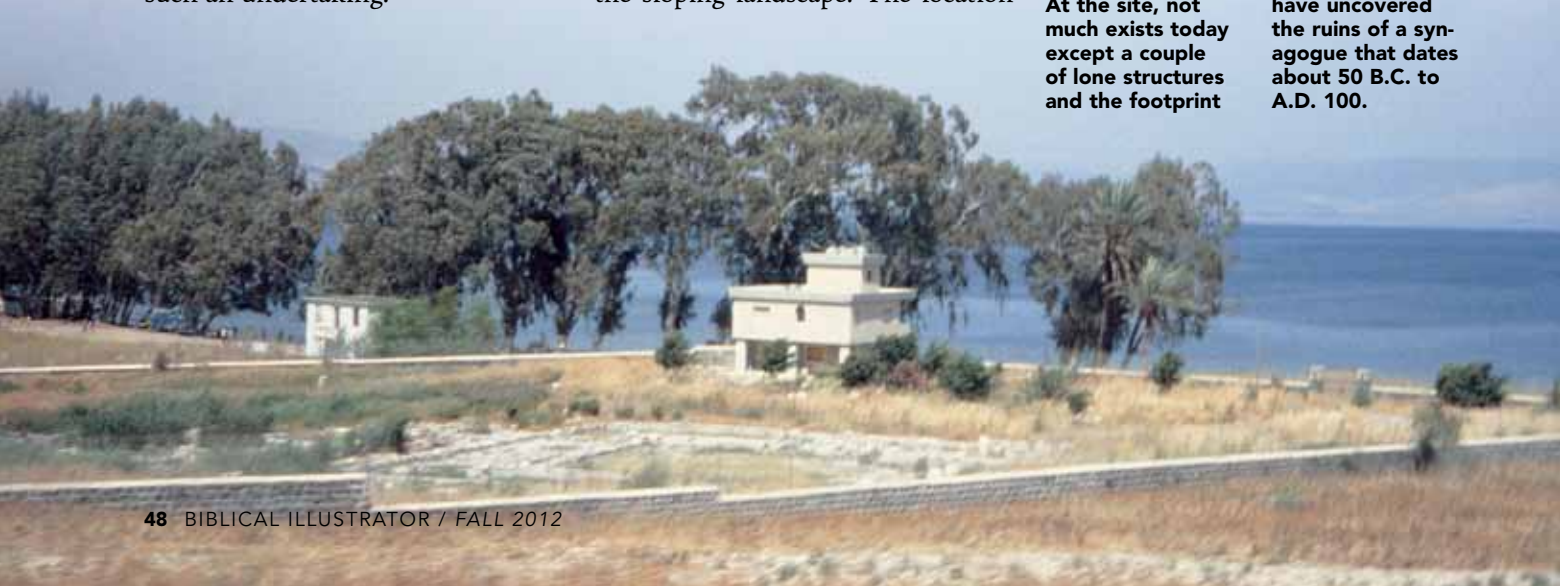
has a unique amphitheater-type quality. That is, the natural lay of the land forms a distinctive bowl or semi-oval shape just below the crest of the mount. This terrain would have naturally amplified Jesus' voice as He addressed the masses. Picture Jesus sitting just below the crest of the rising hill, His voice echoing into and across the natural amphitheater. This was the setting for one of history's most thought-provoking sermons.

Structure

What many recognize when examining the Sermon on the Mount is the symmetry of a carefully

Beside the Sea of Galilee, Magdala was the hometown of Mary of Magdlene. At the site, not much exists today except a couple of lone structures and the footprint

of an old house just inside the concrete wall. Recent excavations, though, have uncovered the ruins of a synagogue that dates about 50 B.C. to A.D. 100.



SOLOMON IN ALL HIS SPLENDOR

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preached against worry. He said, "This is why I tell you: Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing?... And why do you worry about clothes? Learn how the wildflowers of the field grow: they don't labor or spin thread. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was adorned like one of these!" (Matt.6:25,28-29, HCSB). The King James Version translates the wildflowers in the field phrase as "lilies of the field."

Shown below are flowers growing at Gath-hepher, Jonah's hometown. The red flowers are known as "crown anemone." Throughout Israel, they grow in abundance in the springtime and are thought to be the "lilies of the field" that Jesus mentioned in His Sermon on the Mount.



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Above: Still considered a sacred place of worship, believers share communion in the garden of the Church of the Beatitudes.

Left: Altar area inside the Church of the Beatitudes in Galilee. Antonio Barluzzi, who was both an Italian architect and Franciscan monk, designed the structure, which was built in 1936-1938.

constructed sermon containing subjects that would have been familiar to most Jews of the first century A.D. A close examination of the text reveals at least three major sections that give meaning to the instructive nature of the sermon.

The first major section begins with the Beatitudes and receives further illustration by the "salt and light" metaphor (Matt. 5:1-16). "Beatitudes" is simply Latin for "blessings." Matthew shows how Jesus clearly linked

"blessings" with those whose behavior was consistent with a "better" or "deeper" righteousness that He was demanding. Some have argued that the Beatitudes are antitheses of the Law. A close reading of the text, however, shows these not as antithetical but rather fulfilling of Mosaic Law.⁵ A surface reading of the Beatitudes could lead one to conclude Jesus was urging His believers to be separate from the world. This ascetic lifestyle was far from what Jesus was

advocating, a fact made clear by His salt and light metaphors.

Salt was abundant in the first century A.D. and had a variety of beneficial uses. Primarily in this context salt was for seasoning food—being mixed in with that which had no or little flavor or being used as a preservative. Clearly Jesus used the metaphor of salt to illustrate the need for His followers to use their redeemed lives to stem the tide of moral decay of their society.



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Light, in the biblical text, is one of the more complex metaphors to define. In this case, however, Jesus clearly set the context for His light metaphor. John records Jesus' proclamation, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12, NIV). As Christ is the light of the world so His disciples should reflect His function and foci in their lives in order to overcome moral decay. So in these two metaphors, we do not see diverse meanings but rather complementary ideas that spur Christ's disciples to be His agents of change in the world.

The second major section addresses the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law (Matt. 5:17-6:4). Introducing this section, Jesus stated clearly that He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but rather to fulfill them (v. 17). In order to illustrate His fulfillment of

Above: Mount Sinai in the Sinai Peninsula, where Moses received the Law.

Right: A pot and hoard of silver coins dating from the 1st cent. A.D. These coins were found in the Jericho area. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus said, "No one can be a slave of two masters, since either he will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot be slaves of God and of money" (HCSB).



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the Law, Jesus cited issues such as murder, adultery, divorce, *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation), love for enemies, and giving to the needy—all elements of the Mosaic Law. "Even more fundamental to the six illustrations is Jesus' role as sovereign

interpreter of the law, as he himself fulfills it (v. 17). He alone, therefore, has the authority to declare how each part of the law will apply to his followers."⁶ He was (and is) the fulfillment of the Law of Moses; with a booming voice

echoing down to the Sea of Galilee Jesus declared the Law fulfilled in Him. As we read the portion of the text that deals with the Law, we are convicted that in order to live up to Jesus' expectations we must be led by the Spirit lest failure seize us as impotent believers.

The third major section (Matt. 6:5-7:27) identifies the righteous acts that Christ's followers are called to do both inwardly and outwardly. This section explains "who" we are as Christians. Teaching on praying persistently (complete with the Model Prayer, 6:9-15), fasting, laying up treasures in heaven, having security in Christ, judging others, understanding the narrow gate to eternal life, bearing spiritual fruit, and recognizing the wise and foolish builders all help us understand who we are in Christ. Jesus used these actions to unite "who" and

Drying beds along the western shore of the Dead Sea are used for harvesting minerals from the waters, including salt.



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"what" we are in Him. Rather than contradictory, they are complementary actions of a Christian who is salt and light, who is fulfilling the Mosaic Law (via the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, see Gal. 5:16-23).

One of the most moving and yet clarifying parts in this section is the Model Prayer (also known as the Lord's Prayer). Matthew includes the prayer as part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Luke, however, describes the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to pray. Jesus responded by offering an abbreviated version of the same prayer (Luke 11:1-4). The two accounts show that Jesus, more than once, instructed His followers with this eloquent prayer. In this Model Prayer is the reflection again of being a disciple, salt and light, and of living the Christian life through the power of God.

Significance

At the high-water mark of Jesus' early ministry, He drew a large

group of people and began to teach them—near the crest of the mountain. This would change history forever. His voice amplified—carried by the terrain—would carry to them words that would radically challenge their theology and lives. The evidence? "When Jesus had finished...the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matt. 7:28b-29, NIV). Further, His words in this sermon still amaze and challenge us today. **B**

1. Sharon Kay Dobbins, "The Principles of Equity and the Sermon on the Mount as Influence in Gandhi's Truth Force," *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1988): 131-36.

2. See Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 94-95.

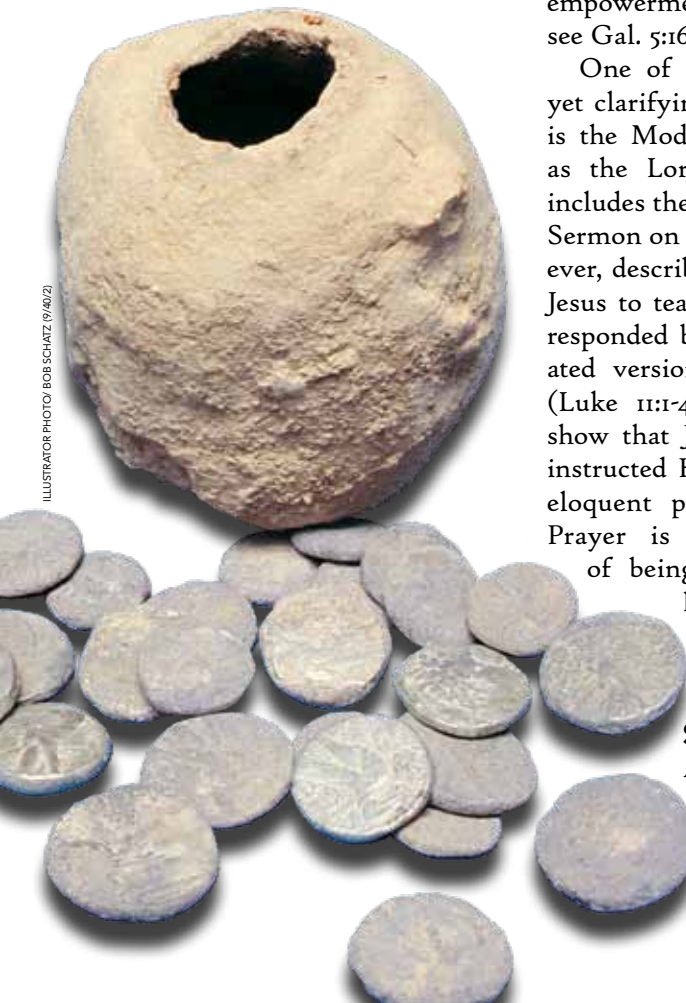
3. See Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 354.

4. See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 279-80.

5. Glen H. Stassen, "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-7:12)," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 122, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 270.

6. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 106.

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