

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: AN OVERVIEW



Top view of the sea of Galilee from the Mount of Beatitudes, Israel stock photo

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) is one of the best-known and yet most complex sermons that Jesus preached to His followers.

- **Setting:** Scholars believe the crowd gathered to hear Jesus’s sermon on a hillside overlooking the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. This setting would have afforded Jesus both a height to look out over the sea and a view to the south of a sloping landscape. The location has a unique amphitheater feel to it since the land forms a distinctive bowl or oval shape below the crest of the mountain. This would have amplified Jesus’s voice as He addressed the masses.
- **Structure:** The sermon demonstrates a careful symmetry of topics that would have been familiar to many first-century Jews. A close examination reveals at least three major sections that give meaning to the instructive nature of Jesus’s message: 1) The Beatitudes and the teachings about “salt” and “light” (5:1-16), which emphasize the blessings of behavior that is consistent with the expectations of God’s kingdom; 2) The fulfillment of the Mosaic law (5:17–6:4), in which Jesus clearly stated His own

personal fulfillment of the law and His sole authority to interpret the law rightly; and 3) Teachings about inward and outward behavior of kingdom people (6:5–7:27), including lessons on prayer, fasting, worry, and kingdom priorities.

- **Significance:** In some ways, the Sermon on the Mount represented a high-water mark for Jesus’s popularity in the moment. His message, carried by the terrain, radically changed common understandings of theology and practical faith. But His words continue to change the world centuries later, and they continue to challenge His followers as we seek to live out the kingdom expectations outlined in these three important chapters.

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