NT220

Jesus in Galilee-
Popularity & Misunderstanding

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Updated 2014
Lesson 1 Study Guide

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Misunderstanding

The Steady Ministry & The Fickle Response

Updated 2014
Objectives

This lesson surveys the second phase of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee and discusses the contribution of miracles to His ministry. It will then discuss the decline of Jesus’ popularity and His withdrawal to Gentile areas.

When you complete this lesson, “The Steady Ministry and the Fickle Response,” you should be able to:

- Discuss Jesus’ use of miracles as an essential part of His ministry.
- Explain why Jesus withdrew from Galilee and ministered in Gentile areas.
- Describe the dangers of disbelief in and opposition to God’s revelation.

Scripture Reading

Read Mark 1-8.
Course Title: Jesus in Galilee—Popularity & Misunderstanding

Lesson One: The Steady Ministry and the Fickle Response

I. Introduction to Galilean Ministry—Part 2

In our last lesson we surveyed the initial phase or period of Jesus’ popularity, what some call His great Galilean ministry. We want to turn to the second half of that Galilean ministry in this lesson, and we continue by following the basic outline of Mark’s gospel, who is not always writing in strict chronological fashion as compared to the parallels in Matthew and Luke. It introduces us to all of the major topics and literary forms that are used by the gospel writers to summarize this phase of Jesus’ life.

II. Nature Miracles

We have seen that in Mark 1 he introduces us to a sample of Jesus’ miracles. At the end of Mark 4, beginning in verse 35 and carrying on well into chapter 6, we have another cluster of miracles from Jesus’ Galilean ministry: this time, in many instances, what scholars have often called His nature miracles—those which demonstrate, in as dramatic fashion as any, the remarkable supernatural power that Jesus, as fully human but also fully God, could draw on, on those occasions when it was His Father’s will.

A. Calming the Storm

Mark 4:35-41 describes the famous miracle of Jesus stilling the storm on the Sea of Galilee; and it is important to read this passage carefully, because countless generations of preachers have tried to apply it by focusing not on the supernatural element but on the ways in which Jesus “stills the storms in our lives.” Unfortunately, as many of us are perhaps well aware, God does at times leave us in the midst of other kinds of storms, and this miracle is not primarily one to promise us automatic relief from all of our difficulties. Instead, if we read carefully the way the gospel writers narrate it, we learn that it led the disciples to ask, “Who is this, that even wind and waves obey Him?” In short, for the gospel writers this miracle, like the others that we will see in this section of Jesus’ ministry, was designed to raise the question of who Jesus was, to point people to belief in Jesus as the Christ, as the God-man. That may or may not involve Him stilling the storms of our lives, but it clearly alludes back to Job and the Psalms, in which God treads on the wind and waves and shows mastery over the sea and the cosmic forces.

B. Power over the Demonic

This theme continues in Mark 5 and parallels as another very dramatic exorcism occurs—Jesus exorcising the Gerasene demoniac. He sends the demons out of the afflicted man into the pigs, who then throw themselves off the cliff to their destruction in the Sea of Galilee. One has to
put oneself into a Jewish mind-set here and recall the comedy, even; this would have been heard with a first-century Jewish audience. Pigs were the most unclean of animals and were not to have been raised for their meat as presumably these pig farmers were. This is not a miracle of the destruction of human life, but merely of animal life; and tragic as the loss may have been for the pig farmers, it is fully in keeping with what the first-century Jew would have understood would have fit in with God’s design. The important part of this story, again however, is not what we sometimes make of it in our concern for animal rights or the like, but rather how it points out who Jesus is and the supernatural power that He has: the townspeople’s reaction, falling before Jesus, as Peter in fact had done at an earlier miracle beside the Sea of Galilee narrated in Luke 5:1-11, saying, “Depart from us”—recognizing their unworthiness to be in the presence of one who is both so powerful and so holy.

C. Power over Disease and Death

Jesus demonstrates, therefore, His power over disaster, His power over the demonic, and, as we move to the latter part of Mark 5 beginning with verse 21, we learn of His power over disease and over death: the twin stories, narrated together because of their chronological relationship to each other, of curing the woman with a flow of blood, a hemorrhage as we would call it today, and of raising Jairus’ daughter. The interesting element here, as well as the fact that here is the first of several miracles that demonstrate Jesus’ ability actually to bring life out of death, to bring humans back from the dead, is the two-fold statement that faith was part of the process that led to the healing of these two individuals and their loved ones. It is interesting to study what the gospel writers had to teach about the relationship of faith and miracles, particularly in light of widespread diversity and even confusion in teaching among God’s people today on this very topic.

If one looks at the four passages in the gospel of Mark, including the one that comes in Mark 6:6 speaking of how Jesus could do few miracles in Nazareth because of their lack of faith, one can very clearly see models or illustrations in which faith is an important prerequisite for God to work a miracle. The healing of the hemorrhaging woman, the raising of Jairus’ daughter, and the failure of Nazareth all illustrate, as do other passages, that God chooses to work through the power of human faith to produce miracles. Undoubtedly, one reason that we do not always see more miracles is because we do not always have sufficient faith. But that principle cannot be made the only or even the primary teaching of the Gospels about the relationship of faith and miracles. In the case of the stilling of the storm, we read rather that miracles came where there was little or no faith at all precisely for the purpose to try to instill faith. If we recall the miracles that we surveyed in our last lesson, of turning water into wine in John 2 and of healing the nobleman’s son in John 4, John again gives explicit statements that these miracles were meant to bring about belief on the part of those who saw them—in one case the disciples, in the other case complete outsiders to Jesus’ ministry. God can work miracles where there is no faith at all, and we dare not assume one uniform relationship between faith and God’s ability to work miracles.

D. Feeding the Five Thousand

Returning to Mark’s skeletal outline and proceeding with his series of nature miracles, we come
in Mark 6 to the feeding of the five thousand. Here yet another motive comes into play that is a key motive in several of Jesus’ miracles throughout the Gospels and that is simple compassion for human need. Here nothing is said of Jesus attempting to instill faith or to respond to faith, but rather he sees these crowds who are hungry. But also Mark’s gospel tells us they are like sheep without a shepherd; that is, the religious leaders who should have properly shepherded the flock of the people of Israel have not been doing their jobs properly. And so, once again, irrespective of whatever this story teaches about faith or about God’s compassion or His ability to take care of human need, the primary focus is again christological—that is, raising the question of the identity of Jesus. John brings this out very clearly in his account; this, in fact, is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in all four Gospels and therefore it must be an extremely crucial one.

John alone describes after this feeding of the five thousand when Jesus has crossed back over the lake and is preaching in the synagogue in Capernaum His sermon or discourse in which He calls Himself the bread of life. Just as He has provided for people’s physical needs out in the wilderness, He will be the spiritual sustenance for those who believe in Him. Even in the versions in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, however, these christological overtones are not absent, and they explain some of the otherwise incidental and somewhat curious details of the narrative. Not only does Jesus implicitly contrast Himself with the shepherds who are not doing their jobs (Mark 6:34 alluding to similar prophecy in the days of Ezekiel 34:5 where the shepherd is the one who is to redeem Israel), but also the fact that bread for the wilderness conjures up memories in any faithful Jew’s mind of the miracle of Moses providing manna in the wilderness and those prophecies that the Messianic prophet would be one like unto Moses, coming out of Deuteronomy 18:15-18. The fact that there were basketfuls in abundance, and in the case of the feeding of the five thousand, twelve baskets, again alludes back to the story of the wilderness wanderings, the twelve tribes of Israel, and manna as well as quail—more than anyone could possibly eat, particularly when people complained about their lack of provisions.

E. Walking on the Water

This christological focus then carries through to the final nature miracle of this phase of Mark’s gospel—the final verses or close to the end of Mark 6:45-52 and parallel in which Jesus walks on the water. But again, this is not just some convenient way to get across the lake fast when the boat had already been taken by the disciples. Rather, it is a self-revelation of Jesus’ deity to His followers: the words, “Fear not! It is I” (the latter part of that expression could also be more literally translated, “Fear not! I am”—the very words that form, in the Greek translation of Exodus 3:14, the divine name for Yahweh Himself, “I am who I am”); and the language in Mark 6:48 that Jesus meant to pass by the disciples probably does not mean He was hoping they would not see Him, but uses the identical verb that appears in the account of Moses seeing God pass by him on Mount Sinai in Exodus 33. In other words, God is revealing Himself: what scholars call a theophany, a revelation of God in the person of Jesus.

F. Purpose of Miracles

If we would summarize then, what we have learned about the purpose of Jesus’ miracles, particularly these more dramatic miracles over nature, we may speak of an evidential purpose
meant to point out who Jesus is and provide evidence for that, an evangelistic purpose meant
to further call people to explicit faith and discipleship in Jesus; an empathetic purpose—simple
compassion for human need; and perhaps most significantly of all, though perhaps also least
understood or noted, an eschatological purpose. As put most clearly in Jesus’ debate back again
in the context of His exorcisms with the Jewish leaders—that if I drive out demons by the Spirit
of God, or as one parallel puts it, by “the finger of God,” then the kingdom of God has come
upon you.” Perhaps more than any other single purpose for Jesus’ miracles is to demonstrate
that the kingdom of God is now breaking into human history in a new and decisive and
climactic phase. We must be careful beyond that, however, of assuming any consistency of
patterns as to when God will or will not work miracles, lest we compromise His sovereignty
in the process. With the conclusion of our survey of Jesus’ nature miracles we reach again a
turning point in the narratives of the Synoptic Gospels.

III. Withdrawal from Galilee

A. Beginning of the End

Jesus’ phase of popularity is bringing great crowds, crowds so much that He has to flee
from one territory to another to escape them, and still scarcely succeeds. As a result, but
also because, of the question of His identity, the newness of His ministry over against the
Jewish leaders is increasingly coming into focus. Jesus prepares for a phase of his ministry
which students of the life of Christ have often described as His withdrawal from Galilee. Still
following Mark’s outline, as we turn to the beginning of Mark 7 we read a story which still
takes place in Galilee, yet another conflict with the Jewish leaders, but which prepares the
way for the withdrawal. We might speak of it as Jesus’ theological or ideological withdrawal
from Galilee; it brings His disputes with the Jewish leaders and their ancestral traditions,
particularly the oral laws of the Pharisees, into the sharpest focus thus far. It is a debate
that takes place over their purity laws, on what does or does not defile a person, and comes
in the context of their coming to Jesus’ disciples complaining that Jesus does not follow the
ceremonial washing of hands prior to eating. They are not accusing Jesus of breaking any
law that comes out of the Old Testament—there is no evidence that Jesus during His earthly
life ever does this or encourages anyone else to—but He clearly is coming into conflict with
their oral traditions. The issue of purity leads Jesus to raise a second question in His response
and that is to point out how even the Pharisees often set aside even the written laws of the
Old Testament for some of their traditions that they have built on elaborating the Hebrew
Scriptures.

He alludes to a practice known as corban, the Hebrew word that refers to a gift devoted to God
exclusively for the use of the temple, often a financial gift. But the paradox of the Jewish oral
tradition was that while the giver of this gift was still alive he could draw on its money and
its earnings for his own liking, but it could not be used to help anybody else, even in the case
Jesus discusses—aged family members who are perhaps in acute need. These inconsistencies
then lead Jesus to challenge more generally the oral laws of the Jews than just the issue of
purity with which the debate began. By the time we reach the end of the story, particularly
in Mark’s account in Mark 7:19, Jesus has just told a short parable about how it is not what
goes into a person such as food that defiles them but what comes out from them. Mark, as the
narrator of the story, then adds the parenthetical comment, “by this, Jesus declared all food clean.” This may well not have been a realization that came to any of the disciples’ minds as Jesus was alive and they heard this, for Acts 10 will have to describe a supernatural vision from heaven repeated three times before the apostle Peter comes to the conclusion that there are no unclean foods in the age of the new covenant that Jesus has inaugurated. It may be Mark’s reflection on Peter’s incident, as his secretary or collector of his memoirs, that enables Mark to make this parenthetical comment here, but it clearly shows that the Christian church by the time of the writing of the Gospel had come to the conclusion that Jesus was much more than just a faithful Jew. The revelation that He was bringing from God would, in certain ways, actually supersede or fulfill God’s laws in ways that would mean that Christ’s followers would not follow those laws or apply them literally in the ways that Jews previously had.

B. Syrophoenicia

With this theological foundation for Jesus’ withdrawal from Israel, one can then trace the rest of Mark 7 and well into chapter 8 in which Jesus actually geographically leaves the territory of Israel—Galilee, Samaria, and Judea that formed the heart of the Jewish nation in the first century. Mark 7:24-50 finds Him to the northwest, in the territory of Syrophoenicia, exorcising the daughter of a woman there; and although we have alluded in a previous lesson to Jesus’ cryptic words that seemingly rebuke this woman for being a Gentile, at the outset He eventually does grant her request and praises her great faith. Perhaps He had been testing her all along. At any rate, where the story ends is that a Gentile and her daughter are the recipients of Jesus’ blessing, of His miracle-working ministry, every bit as much as many of the Jews had previously been.

C. Decapolis Area

Mark 7:31-37 and parallels proceeds to the east of Galilee to the region of the Decapolis, where Jesus heals a deaf mute (again, we may reasonably infer, a Gentile); and here the term that is used to describe this man’s disability is a term that appears elsewhere in the Greek Scriptures only in Isaiah 35:6—again a model of the eschatological blessings prophesied in Isaiah coming to Gentiles as well as Jews. The feeding of the four thousand with which Mark 8 begins, repeats down to very minute details the same miracles of the five thousand but again in Gentile territory, suggesting that God, through Jesus, is the God of both kinds of people. Here the leftover baskets are seven-fold, the universal number of Scripture to refer to all humanity rather than the twelve tribes of Israel. Mark then proceeds to the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida, just barely across the eastern shores of the Sea of Galilee from the Jordan River but again in largely Gentile territory.

D. Caesarea Philippi

As we reach the close of Mark 8, we come to the climax of this large year-long phase of Jesus’ great Galilean ministry and the transition point that will set the stage for the final year or phase of His ministry that will see Him moving inexorably toward the cross.

Again we are outside of Israeliite territory, on the road to Caesarea Philippi north of Galilee,
when Jesus initiates the discussion with His disciples that will eventually illicit Simon Peter’s famous confession of faith, “You are the Christ,” or as Matthew’s fuller version of that passage goes on to say, “the Son of the living God.” Matthew alone finds Jesus praising Peter’s confession, not as something that was humanly given but divinely given, and promising that “on this rock (the Greek word *petra*), a play on the Greek name of Peter—Petra), I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” There is this passage also in Matthew 16:19, in particular in which Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom.

Much theological controversy over the centuries of church history has surrounded these passages. In some circles Peter has been elevated as virtually the first pope, treated as if he were infallible—the doctrine of apostolic succession of followers of Peter with the same privileges having been derived from this text. As an overreaction against those excesses there are those who have said Peter is not the rock at all—it is merely the confession of his mouth (though this may be over-subtle in terms of the original languages; in Aramaic, the identical word *kepha* would have been used to refer both to Peter’s name and to the word for rock or stone.) More likely, what Peter is being promised here is that he will be a foundational church leader, though nothing is said about any of his successors or any infallibility. Rather, what we see him performing throughout the book of Acts is as a key leader of early church history, often going to the site of a new place, a new development in the spread of the Gospel. One thinks particularly of the story of Acts 8 with the conversion of the Samaritans, which may reflect the privileges that are given to Peter in this context. That the Gospels are not trying to gloss over or overly exalt Peter is very clear from what immediately follows in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. Whatever divine insight Peter had in this moment of illumination quickly takes a back seat to his unpreparedness for Jesus’ next remarks. For the first of three times in rapid succession Jesus will predict His upcoming death, all of the events that lead up to it—the suffering, the ignominy—and then ultimately His resurrection. Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes Him for such a prophecy, making it clear that even this far into His ministry he is not prepared for a dying, even a crucified, Messiah.

E. The Way to the Cross

The remaining teachings that round out this section of Jesus’ withdrawal, and even His return to Galilee before His actual departure for Jerusalem, take up the theme of suffering. The end of Mark 8 and all of Mark 9 (and their parallels) deal with how the disciples too must take up their cross and follow Jesus. There is one momentary exception to this pattern of teaching about discipleship on the road to the cross, and it is the miracle of the transfiguration in the first part of Mark 9—reminding the disciples, as it were, that there is glory on the other side of the cross. The transfiguration foreshadows Jesus’ resurrection and ultimately His ascension and heavenly exaltation. Disciples too can look forward to ultimate perfection and glory with Jesus, but unfortunately the circumstances of this life, whether through overt persecution for being a follower of Jesus or whether through the ordinary trials of sickness caused by life in a fallen world, remind us that the natural form of the Christian life is often one of suffering. Our glory, our complete triumph, often is deferred until the other side of our deaths and resurrection as well.
Discussion Questions

Why do you think Jesus performed so many miracles? What is your understanding and expectation in regard to miracles occurring today? Explain your point of view.

Why do you think the Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in all four Gospels? Explain your thoughts.

Describe, in your own words, the miracles involving Gentiles discussed in this lesson. Why were these miracles important? What implications might there have been if Jesus had not performed any miracles among the Gentiles?
Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:


Read Chapter 50: “He Came to Serve” (Mark)

**Philip Yancey Devotional**

Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, and He disappeared from their sight. (Luke 24:31)

In this scene at the end of Luke’s gospel, two followers were walking away from Jerusalem, downhearted and perplexed. Their dream of “the one who was going to redeem Israel” had died along with their leader on the cross. And yet they too had heard the crazy rumors of an empty tomb. What did it all mean?

A stranger appeared beside the two forlorn disciples. At first he seemed the only man alive who hadn’t heard about the incredible week in Jerusalem. But as he talked it became clear that he knew more about what had happened than anyone. Painstakingly, he traced the whole story of the Gospel, beginning with Moses and the prophets. According to him, the prophets had predicted all along that the Messiah would suffer these things.

The stranger fascinated them, so much so that they begged him to stay longer. Then at mealtime, he made a hauntingly familiar gesture and the last link snapped into place. It was Jesus sitting at their table! No one else. Without a doubt, He was alive.

They were two ordinary people, but the encounter with the risen Christ changed them forever. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” they recalled. They dashed to meet the Twelve (now Eleven, with Judas’s betrayal) only to learn that Peter, too, had seen Jesus. Suddenly, in the midst of that chaotic scene of joy and confusion, Jesus Himself appeared. He explained once and for all that His death and resurrection were not unforeseen, but rather lay at the heart of God’s plan all along.

Jesus had one last promise to keep: He departed from earth, and in His place left the band of believers to carry out his mission. These people, common people with more than a touch of cowardice, had followed Jesus, listened to Him, and watched Him die. But seeing Jesus alive changed all that. They returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and before long they were out telling the world the good news.

Life Question: How did the truth about Jesus “dawn” on you?
Glossary

**Bethsaida** — (Greek “house of fishing”) - A town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Many scholars believe there were two towns of the same name, one to the east and the other to the west of the Jordan. The precise locations are disputed.

**Decapolis** — (Greek “ten-city”) - A loose confederation of ten essentially independent Hellenistic cities. It included a portion of Bashan and Gilead, and is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Mt 4:25; Mk 5:20; 7:31).

**Syrophoenicia** — Phoenicia was incorporated into the Roman province of Syria prior to the New Testament period. This title was used to distinguish the area from Lybo-phoenicia in North Africa.
Quiz

1. According to Dr. Blomberg, Jesus’ Galilean ministry lasted approximately:
   A. Six months
   B. One year
   C. Two years
   D. Three years

2. During Jesus’ withdrawal from ministering in the Galilee area, He visited:
   A. Syrophoenicia
   B. Decapolis area
   C. Caesarea Philippi
   D. All of the above

3. In some circles, this man is considered to be the first pope:
   A. Paul
   B. Barnabas
   C. John
   D. Peter

4. Perhaps more than any other single purpose for Jesus’ miracles is to:
   A. Demonstrate His superiority over other gods.
   B. Bring glory to Himself.
   C. Demonstrate that the kingdom of God is now breaking into human history.
   D. Provoke the devil.

5. The transfiguration was:
   A. A foreshadowing of Jesus’ resurrection
   B. Witnessed by the Twelve
   C. Witnessed by a crowd
   D. A foreshadowing of the end of Jesus’ miracles

6. What did the debate involving the “Corban” tradition focus on?
   A. The yeast, or evil influence, of the Jews
   B. The historical priority of the Jews
   C. The hypocrisy of setting aside the written laws of the Old Testament in favor of Jewish oral tradition
   D. That kingdom blessings are for Gentiles as well as the Jews

7. What is the relationship between faith and miracles taught in the Gospels?
   A. If you truly have faith, you will experience a miracle.
   B. If you have faith even as small as a mustard seed, you can make any miracle happen.
   C. When you mature enough in your faith, God will bless you by allowing miracles in your life.
   D. There is no consistent relationship between faith and miracles in the Gospels.
8. Which did Jesus **not** say to Peter and the disciples following Peter’s confession of Christ?  
   A. “Everything is possible for him who believes.”  
   B. “Get behind me, Satan!”  
   C. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”  
   D. “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”

9. Which of the following is **not** one of the purposes of Jesus’ miracles?  
   A. Evidential  
   B. Empathetic  
   C. Enigmatic  
   D. Eschatological

10. Which of the following miracles did not occur during Jesus’ Galilean ministry?  
    A. Feeding of the four thousand  
    B. Feeding of the five thousand  
    C. Exorcism of Gerasene demoniac  
    D. Raising of Jairus’ daughter

Lesson 2 Study Guide

NT220
Jesus in Galilee—Popularity & Misunderstanding
The Sermon on the Mount: How God’s Kingdom Works

Updated 2014

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Objectives

In this lesson you will study Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount, focusing on how to interpret it and then on an outline of its major themes. The lesson concludes with a brief survey of two other of Jesus’ larger teachings contained in Matthew.

When you complete this lesson, “The Sermon on the Mount: How God’s Kingdom Works,” you should be able to:

- Discuss various interpretations of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as a basis for your own understanding of its meaning.
- Name and explain the meaning of seven teachings from the Sermon on the Mount.
- Discuss Jesus’ teaching in the missionary discourse and on humility and forgiveness.
- Form principles for Christian living from Jesus’ own teachings on the subject.

Scripture Reading

Read Matthew 5-7, 9-11, and 18.
Course Title: Jesus in Galilee—Popularity & Misunderstanding

Lesson Two: The Sermon on the Mount: How God’s Kingdom Works

I. Review and Introduction to Additional Material in Matthew

In our previous two lessons we surveyed Mark’s account of Jesus’ great Galilean ministry, but in so doing we have skipped over material that is found in Matthew, Luke, and John contemporaneous with this same period of time. In this lesson, we want to go back and see what it is that we have skipped in Matthew, focusing primarily on Matthew’s distinctive concern to present Jesus as a teacher. We will not comment on everything that Matthew uniquely includes during Jesus’ great Galilean ministry, but particularly the blocks of teaching, the sermons if you like, that uniquely punctuate this account of Matthew.

When we introduced the gospel of Matthew, we discovered that there are five such blocks in this gospel: chapters 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount; chapter 10, Jesus commissioning the Twelve to go out on their first missionary travels within Israel; chapter 13, a sermon in parables; chapter 18, a sermon on humility and forgiveness; and Jesus’ famous discourse on the Mount of Olives in chapters 24-25. We have already commented briefly on the parables in conjunction with Mark 4, and the Olivet discourse comes at the tail end of Jesus’ life and fits more naturally in an upcoming lesson. That leaves three sermons that we want to focus on for this lesson: the Sermon on the Mount, the sermon on mission, and the sermon on humility and forgiveness. Because of its length and because of its fame and importance in the history of Christianity, we will devote considerably more attention to the first of these three sermons, the Sermon on the Mount, and then make much briefer comments about the remaining two.

II. Interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount

There has been a plethora of interpretations to the Sermon on the Mount throughout the history of the church because of the stringent nature of its commands, summarized or epitomized perhaps most poignantly in Matthew 5:48 when Jesus draws the summary that His followers are to be “perfect” as His heavenly Father is perfect. It is possible to translate the Greek word here as “mature” and therefore understanding Jesus is not calling for sinless perfection (something Scripture is clear—it is impossible for disciples in this life). But still, the radical nature of His sermon remains: turning the other cheek; going the extra mile; redefining adultery in terms of lust; murder in terms of hatred; the famous Golden Rule; and many other portions.

A. Historical Overview

If we were to summarize the main approaches to the Sermon throughout history, we might mention six briefly. (1) One approach sees the Sermon primarily as a continuation of Old Testament law, not meant to be something that inspires confidence in the disciples’ of Jesus
ability to follow it, but rather which was meant to drive them to their knees. Requesting a Savior, this is certainly a New Testament concept that Paul will elsewhere enunciate, but it is significant that Matthew 5:1-3 places the Sermon on the Mount in the context of teaching first of all for those who are already committed to Him at some level of discipleship. (2) A second approach is one which believes that Christ’s followers, with the help of God’s Spirit, can—through human efforts—build the kingdom of God in this world and transform the world into a considerably better and more moral and even Christian place. But 2,000 years of various efforts to do this, and the dramatic failures that have ensued, have made it a less plausible option today.

(3) Some have seen Jesus’ ethic as an interim ethic; that is, a striking degree of urgency for a period of time that He believed would be very short—namely the generation of His disciples that would culminate in His return. Unfortunately, this view has to believe that Jesus was mistaken about how quickly He would return and how short a period of human history would ensue. (4) Still others have adopted very existentialist approaches to Jesus’ teachings, denying that any of His ethics are meant to be taken as moral absolutes, but merely as examples of how His followers might act in certain instances, even though they might act very different seeking the immediate guidance of the Spirit for authentic Christian living in other contexts. (5) Still others have tried to explain the serious urgency and stringency of Jesus’ sermon by postponing these commands. One popular but probably incorrect view sees Jesus as offering the kingdom to Jews on the terms of the Sermon on the Mount, but when they reject it then postponing entirely these ethics for some coming millennium or perfect eschatological age.

B. Kingdom Theology

Instead of all of these views, and not withstanding a certain element of truth that each may contain, the view that commands considerable consensus of scholars today may be the view that is often called the “kingdom view.” As with Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God more generally, there is one sense in which it is inaugurated; it has arrived with the presence of Jesus and in the life of the church ever since, but there are other significant ways in which it can only fully arrive, only fully be realized in the lives of disciples, in the age to come after His return. It is probably best, therefore, for us to understand Jesus’ sermon and indeed His ethics more generally as the ideal expression of God’s will for His people—an ideal which can, with some substantial measure, partially be achieved in this life as God’s people yield to His Spirit, but which can only fully, in any serious way, be fulfilled in the life to come.

It is also important to remind ourselves that just as the Sermon is addressed to disciples, it is addressed to disciples living in communities; and many of the practices within the Sermon can be much more significantly obeyed and followed as God’s people live out their lives together—the life of the church, taking interpersonal relationships quite seriously, rather than the life of some radical, individualist Christian trying to go on his or her own. Again, it is controversial but probably significant to say that this also rules out seeing Jesus’ ethic as some kind of model for how governments or states should run themselves, even if in democracies it is important and proper for Christian citizens to promote legislation and ethical policies in keeping with their own personal convictions.
III. Teachings from the Sermon on the Mount

A. Brief Outline

With this overview we may then sketch a brief outline of the Sermon on the Mount, noting Matthew’s predilection for grouping Jesus’ teaching together in series of threes or multiples of threes. The introduction to the Sermon begins with the famous Beatitudes. Matthew’s account has nine. Luke’s account in the Sermon on the Plain is shorter and balances the Beatitudes with woes against those who have the opposite attitude or behavior from those who are blessed. If one was to summarize both versions of the people whom God declares blessed, that is, happy or fortunate, one might speak of it using the contemporary vernacular as everything which is not macho—everything which inverts the world’s standards of what is considered powerful and successful, the poor or the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who seek God’s righteousness, and so forth, culminating with those who are persecuted for the sake of their discipleship with Jesus.

B. Salt and Light

Following the nine Beatitudes are the short little metaphors of salt and light, which balance out the very countercultural call of the Beatitudes with the reminder that this countercultural living nevertheless has to be done in full view of the world so that God’s people can act as a preservative, as salt was in first-century times—also as a light, a beacon, a guidance, a way of pointing the way forward according to God’s standards for others. With Matthew 5:17 through the end of the chapter, Jesus then addresses, at least in Matthew’s account, the question of how all this relates to the Law. As we have seen before, it would not be surprising if, even with these short introductory comments, Jesus’ Jewish listeners were already asking the question, “Is Jesus trying to overthrow our laws, or at least our ancestral unwritten traditions?”

C. Thesis Paragraph

Matthew 5:17-20 can then be taken as the beginning of the body of the Sermon, even a thesis paragraph of sorts, in which Jesus on the one hand very firmly states that He has not come to abolish the Law. But, He goes on to state, not the natural opposite of that statement—that Jesus has not come to preserve the Law, but rather to fulfill it. As we have seen in earlier lessons, the ancient Hebrew and Greek words for “fulfill” can also mean “to fill full,” to bring something to its intended purpose, to a point of completion. The remainder of 5:21-48 gives six antitheses, six examples in which Jesus begins by saying, “you have heard it said of old, but I say unto you . . . ” And what comes out most prominently in these antitheses is not the continuity between Jesus’ teaching and the Law or the ways the Law has been interpreted, but the discontinuity.

Even if at the same time Jesus insists He is not abolishing the Law, clearly He is not allowing it to stand in terms of its applications for His followers unchanged. In His teachings about murder, lust, divorce, oaths, and so forth He internalizes the Law, He radicalizes the Law, and at times He even supersedes the Law—as in preventing what was permitted in Old Testament divorce law, Deuteronomy 24. But whatever else He is doing, He is certainly showing Himself
to be the Law’s sovereign interpreter—a point that is not lost on His audience when, at the very end of the sermon in 7:28–29, Matthew remarks that the crowds marveled because Jesus spoke as if He had authority and not like the Jewish leaders. This does not mean that the Jewish teachers did not have an authority, as we learn from the voluminous rabbinical writings. It was a derived authority, dependent on their ability to quote Scripture or quote a previous authoritative rabbi. Whereas Jesus speaking, almost as if He were God, says simply, “But I say unto you . . . .” It is not an explicit claim for deity, but there are implications there for Jesus’ self-understanding, a very exalted and high view of Himself nevertheless.

D. The Antitheses

The final triad on antitheses in Matthew 5:33 and following particularly call for us to interpret them against their historical background. Turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, giving to him who begs from you, all cry out for interpretation in the context of the small, early first-century Palestinian village. Turning the other cheek, for example, was a way of saying not to trade insults; a slap on the cheek was not a violent bodily assault in first-century Jewish culture but a common way of a superior insulting an inferior. Going the extra mile must be understood in the context of the Roman conscription laws, in which soldiers had the right to commandeer Jews or other subjugated people to help carry their luggage on a forced march for a maximum of a mile. Giving to those who ask from you is set in a context of not taking more collateral clothing than is necessary in a court of law and so forth.

We must be careful in interpreting these passages out of context and taking them in ways that actually contradict what the Scripture teaches elsewhere; for example, in a nonresistance to evil, even though elsewhere clearly Jesus resists evil—at times running away from it, at other times directly combating it, even exorcising it, and claiming that in His ministry He is vanquishing Satan. The close of Matthew 5 brings us, as we mentioned earlier, to some of the most stringent and radical claims of the Sermon, including one of the ways in which Jewish scholars are agreed Jesus was quite distinctive from most forms of religion of His day, namely in a call to loving one’s enemies—clearly one of the hardest challenges for Jesus’ followers in any age.

E. Hypocritical Piety

After chapter 5 and the first main section in the body of the Sermon, there are another three examples that are closely parallel in form, in 6:1–18, concerning true versus hypocritical piety. The three examples Jesus deals with were all well-known in Jewish circles: alms giving, prayer, and fasting. In each case Jesus is commanding His followers not to parade their piety in public so as to receive merely the praise of humans, but rather to do what they can as inconspicuously as possible so that God will reward them instead.

F. The Lord’s Prayer (Mt 6:9–13)

The most famous of the three examples Jesus uses here is clearly His teaching on prayer, because into this context He inserts what has come to be known as the Lord’s Prayer. Although interestingly, particularly with the statement to deliver us from evil and to forgive our sins, this is one prayer which Jesus Himself never actually prayed and from one point of view could not
pray, since Christians believed He was sinless. Many have suggested that it might better have been entitled the Disciples’ Prayer or the Model Prayer, but unfortunately 2,000 years of church history have stuck us with the other term, and it is not likely to change.

Interestingly, the Lord’s Prayer divides into two halves—the first one focusing on God, who He is and what His will is: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Then after we have our perspective on God and His will and focus, we can move on to the second half of the prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” That is where the prayer originally ended. We mentioned in an earlier lesson that an early Christian scribe then added the very pious and perhaps from his point of view more appropriate conclusion, in fact echoing scriptural language from Chronicles: “For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

G. Wealth and Worry

After this short section, the Sermon continues with three examples of Jesus teaching about wealth and about worry (6:19-34), in which He contrasts two masters that ultimately compete for human allegiance: God and mammon, that is, material resources or possessions more generally. In our modern affluent society, it is a significant question how many people, even who profess Christianity, are really serving money or material resources rather than Jesus.

H. Decisions

Chapter 7:1-6 proceed to give three teachings about true and false judgment, how to treat others. Matthew 7:1, “Judge not, lest ye be judged,” is often misapplied and taken out of context. Even by the time we get to Matthew 7:5-6, Jesus is commanding a certain form of right judgment. Rather, the term that is translated “judge” can also in appropriate context be translated “do not be judgmental,” “do not be overly censorious or condemning in your judgment.” The Old Testament knows well the command to leave vindication or vengeance to God; God will ultimately justly judge all people. We will almost certainly get it wrong and be unjust at some point if we try taking it into our hands prematurely.

Matthew 7:7-11 continue with the theme of prayers and their answers, the famous verses to ask, seek and knock, which at first glance sound like a carte blanche until we remember that Matthew 7 is to be read after Matthew 6 with the famous Lord’s Prayer, in which one of the caveats that must enter into all of our praying is “thy will (that is, God’s will) be done.” Matthew 7:12 brings the body of the Sermon to a conclusion with the famous Golden Rule—do unto others as we would have them do unto us. And despite our, at times over-familiarity or even parodies of this principle, it remains a remarkably comprehensive and successful summary effectively guiding our ethical decisions in areas in which Scripture does not explicitly address.

The conclusion of the Sermon then, Matthew 7:13-27 presents three different illustrations for the two choices or the choice of two ways that faces all people who hear Jesus’ response.
Will they simply hear Him and go away or will they hear and obey, becoming His followers and beginning, with His help, to put their principles into practice?

IV. Additional Teachings

A. Missionary Discourse

From the Sermon on the Mount we now turn much more briefly to the sermon on mission, beginning with Matthew 9:35 and ending in 11:1, for the most part occupying the whole of chapter 10 as he sends the Twelve out (Mark tells us, in a shorter parallel, two by two) to replicate Jesus’ ministry both the preaching and teaching and also the healings and exorcising. This sermon breaks into two distinct sections: 10:1-16, which include a variety of instructions that clearly apply only in the context of this specific ministry of the Twelve— their call to travel light, to depend on the hospitality of others and so forth, particularly to go nowhere among the Samaritans and the Gentiles. All of that is explicitly rescinded by Jesus later in His Great Commission at the end of Matthew’s gospel and in His teaching on the last night of His life in Luke 22:35-38, as He tells them now not to go out so vulnerable but to be prepared for hostility.

The second half of the sermon, that which is more directly transferable over to Christian living in all other times and places, therefore, is found in 10:17-42. Here Jesus prophesied that coming hostility, the persecution, being dragged before the rulers of both Jews and Gentiles, things that clearly did not happen to the disciples during Jesus’ earthly lifetime but did happen tragically over and again in the years and generations that followed. Understanding these kinds of distinctions not only helps us to avoid applying passages in the first part of the sermon that were only meant for a short period of time to other situations, but it also helps us make sense of one of the strangest teachings of Jesus in all the Gospels—Matthew 10:23, in which He says they will not have finished going through the cities of Israel before He, the Son of man, would return. When we understand that as referring beyond Jesus’ death and resurrection to the time in the age of the church, we can probably interpret His words as meaning the mission to the Jews which will perennially be incomplete. There will never be a completely positive response from the Jewish people, even as it remains a priority of God’s people to witness to them throughout history.

B. Sermon on Humility and Forgiveness

The final sermon on which we will briefly comment is that which comprises the whole of Matthew 18, the sermon on humility and forgiveness. It too breaks neatly into two parts according to those two themes that we have just mentioned: 18:1-14 dealing with the theme of humility—first the need of humility for disciples (they are to have a childlike attitude, understanding that they are entirely dependent on God and Christ), and also focusing on, in a sense, the humility that God Himself exhibits in the extent to which He goes to seek to save those who are lost (here we have the famous parable of the lost sheep in verses 10-14).

Verses 15-35 turn to the closely related topic of forgiveness and they too subdivide into two subsections that must be taken together. Verses 15-20 deal with what happens with respect to forgiveness when there is no evidence of repentance. This caveat is not immediately obvious
just from the text of Matthew, but is explicitly present in the parallel brief account in Luke 17:3. And it seems to be a necessary interpretive conclusion even from reading the text of Matthew 18 alone, because the following verses, 21-35, very clearly teach that there is to be lavish, even unlimited, forgiveness where there is repentance. The procedures then of 15-20, even if not explicitly stated, must come into play only when there is no repentance.

And it is these verses, 15-18 in particular, that provide the famous basis in the teaching of Jesus for the practice of church discipline. If a brother or sister has something against someone, we are to try to deal with that problem first of all privately. How rarely is this followed when often such a person is the last one to know of our offense, after all of our friends have heard our gossip; but these are Jesus’ words. If this proves ineffective, if it does not solve the situation, then one or two others are to be brought together to still try to deal with the situation relatively privately. Only if that fails is the entire church to be involved in the process, and only if that step fails is something like what the church has come to call excommunication put into play.

It is interesting that the phrase Jesus uses here is simply let such a person be to you as a tax collector or sinner or Gentile, if you like. These are the very people that Jesus bent over backwards to try to win to His side and to show love for. In essence, what Jesus is saying then is that even the most serious and severe step in this process of church discipline treats a person as a non-Christian. That may mean he or she is not permitted in certain assemblies that are for Christians only, but it does not mean that one should break off all contact with that person. As long as they are alive, as long as the possibility of repentance is there, Jesus seeks to win them back.
Discussion Questions

Summarize, in one paragraph, your understanding of the essence of the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in relationship to the Christian life.

Jesus calls us to love our enemies. What do you think this means? Who do you view as your enemies? In what practical ways can you love them?

Describe a few specific, practical applications from the Sermon on the Mount that you can live out in your life. Are you already living these out? If so, explain how. If not, how might you go about doing so?
Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:


Read Chapter 49: “Behold Your King!” (Matthew)

Philip Yancey Devotional
Late-night Conversation - John 3

“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” (John 3:4)

Reading Mark 2 and John 3 back-to-back reveals a chief difference between Mark’s and John’s gospels. Mark gives the panoramic view: action, crowds, short scenes spliced together to create an overall impact. John tightens the camera angle, closing in on a few individual faces—a woman at a well, a blind man, a member of the Jewish ruling council—to compose a more intimate, in-depth portrait.

A simple word or phrase with a profound meaning—that is the style of Jesus’ teaching as presented in John. No biblical author used simpler, more commonplace words: water, world, light, life, birth, love, truth. Yet John used them with such depth and skill that hundreds of authors since have tried to plumb their meaning.

Take this conversation with Nicodemus, for instance. He came to Jesus at night, in order to avoid detection. He risked his reputation and safety by even meeting with Jesus, whom his fellow Pharisees had sworn to kill. But Nicodemus had questions, burning questions, the most important questions anyone could ask: Who are you, Jesus? Have you really come from God? Jesus responded with the image of a second birth, in words we now recognize as among the most familiar in the Bible.

Evidently, some of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus must have sunk in. Later he would stand up for Jesus at the Jewish ruling council and, after the crucifixion, help prepare Jesus’ body for burial.

John follows this conversation with a report from John the Baptist. People were questioning him, too, about the new teacher across the river who was drawing all the crowds. In words that echo Jesus’ own, John confirmed that Jesus held the keys to eternal life. He was indeed the one John had come to announce: “He must become greater; I must become less.”

Life Question: How would you explain the phrase “born again” to someone who had never heard it?
Glossary

**Beatitudes** — (“blessings”) - Statements of blessedness. Broadly speaking, blessings are words uttered to evoke, create, or pronounce well-being, to extol or praise God for His providence, or to make (someone or something) holy.
Quiz

1. Dr. Blomberg mentions that many scholars have suggested it might be better to call the Lord’s Prayer:
   A. Christ’s Prayer
   B. The Disciples’ Prayer
   C. Yahweh’s Prayer
   D. The Good Shepherd’s Prayer

2. The Beatitudes are found in Matthew chapter:
   A. 4
   B. 5
   C. 6
   D. 7

3. Into what halves can the Lord’s Prayer be divided?
   A. First half focusing on Jesus’ ministry; second half focusing on our human will
   B. First half focusing on human sin and repentance; second half focusing on God’s nature
   C. First half focusing on Jesus’ miracles; second half focusing on human sin and repentance
   D. First half focusing on God, who He is and what His will is; second half focusing on our human requests

4. What did Jesus not teach about humility as found in the book of Matthew?
   A. To be a true disciple, you must be childlike.
   B. Causing another person to sin is a serious offense in God’s eyes.
   C. Christians must resist those things that tempt them to sin.
   D. If you are humble on earth, you will surely be praised.

5. What did Jesus not teach in His sermon on mission?
   A. He sent out the twelve disciples to replicate his own ministry.
   B. He told the disciples to leave the Jews and take the Gospel to the Gentiles.
   C. He told the disciples that they would experience persecution.
   D. He told the disciples that many Jews would reject the Gospel.

6. What did Jesus teach about the Law in the Sermon on the Mount?
   A. He did not come to teach the Law, but to add to the Law.
   B. He did not come to bless the Law, but to enhance it.
   C. He did not come to exalt the Law, but to abolish it.
   D. He did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it.
7. To the first-century audience to whom the Sermon on the Mount was addressed, “turn the other cheek” was a way of saying:
   A. Do not trade insults.
   B. Do not engage in a violent bodily assault.
   C. Do not defend yourself.
   D. Do not resist evil.

8. When Jesus speaks about hypocritical piety in Matthew 6:1-18, He does not use the well-known Jewish example of:
   A. Alms giving
   B. Fasting
   C. Bible reading
   D. Praying

9. Which of the following is not a past or present interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount?
   A. Continuation of Old Testament law-impossible to keep, but points to our need for grace
   B. Retaliation of Jesus-in frustration with the people, he gave them teaching
   C. Dispensational-ethics are for future millennial living, but are an impossible ideal for now
   D. Kingdom view-ethics are partially realizable now and remain the ideal to which we, through the Spirit, should strive to attain

10. Which of the following of Jesus’ sermons is not found in the gospel of Matthew?
   A. Jesus as the light of the world
   B. Missionary discourse
   C. Parables on humility and forgiveness
   D. Olivet discourse

Lesson 3 Study Guide

NT220

Jesus in Galilee- Popularity & Misunderstanding

Can We Trust the New Testament Books?

Updated 2014

Our Daily Bread Christian University

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Objectives

We are urged to base our life and eternal destiny on Scripture's teaching. Can we trust it? The New Testament era produced many documents. Only twenty-seven of them carry the authoritative label, “Scripture.” In this lesson you will study “canonization,” the church’s process of recognizing those twenty-seven books as authoritative Scripture. We have no original manuscripts of any of the New Testament documents. So, you will also study the crucial science of textual criticism, which is the process used to assure that the words we read today are the words the original Greek texts contained.

When you complete this lesson, “Can We Trust the New Testament Books?,” you should be able to:

• Explain the need for and the process of textual criticism.
• Name and describe various sources used to reconstruct the original New Testament texts.
• Define and explain the process used to establish the New Testament canon.
• Discuss the political and geographical setting in which Jesus and the Apostles lived and wrote.

Scripture Reading

Read Mark 9-16.
Transcript

Course Title: Jesus in Galilee—Popularity & Misunderstanding

Lesson Three: Can We Trust the New Testament Books?

I. In this lesson, we will discuss the development of the New Testament text with regard to the sources of the text and its canonicity. We will also begin to examine the New Testament settings in terms of the geography of the New Testament world, Palestine, and Jerusalem.

II. Development of the New Testament Text

The New Testament was originally written, as it is well known, in Greek. The Greek of the New Testament is Koine (common dialect), the stage in the development of the language from the classical Attic to the modern idiom. It prevailed from c. 300 B.C. to the sixth century A.D. Koine was the form of the language used, when Greece had attained its greatest territorial expansion, as the lingua franca of the Mediterranean world. The Greek, in general, used by Gentiles in the Koine period was the same as that in which the New Testament was written.

Manuscript evidence for the text of the New Testament is vastly more abundant than for any other ancient document. The oldest known manuscripts of the works of some of the Greek classical authors are copies made 1,000 years or more after the author’s death. The number of manuscripts of the ancient classics is also limited: about 50 manuscripts of the works of Aeschylus (389-314 B.C.), 100 of Sophocles (496?-406 B.C.), and only one each of the Greek Anthology and the Annals of Tacitus (Roman historian, 55?-117?). Of the New Testament, however, there are more than 5,000 manuscripts of part or all of the Greek text, 2,000 Greek lectionaries, 8,000 manuscripts in Latin, and 1,000 additional manuscripts in various ancient versions.

New Testament manuscripts are categorized according to a system initiated by J. J. Wettstein (1751), which has since been expanded to include (1) papyrus manuscripts; (2) uncial manuscripts (manuscripts written in all capital letters); (3) minuscule manuscripts (manuscripts written in cursive letters); (4) ancient versions, such as Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, etc.; (5) patristic citations (quotations from early church fathers); and (6) ancient lectionaries (books of liturgical lessons for the church year).

A. Papyrus Manuscripts

The papyrus manuscripts of the New Testament are its earliest extant witnesses and are therefore significant for the study of early Christian history and determination of the original text. Discovered primarily in the twentieth century in Egypt, papyri now number close to 100. Under the present international system of enumeration of manuscripts, papyrus manuscripts are designated by the letter “P” followed by a numerical identification. The oldest extant fragment (P52), found in a mummy case, contains a small portion of John 18 and has been dated to c. 125.
Several papyrus manuscripts come from c. 200: P32 (fragments of Titus), P64/67 (fragments of Mt 3; 5; 26), P46 (sections of Ro 5-7; Heb 1; 1 and 2Co; Eph; Gal; Php; Col; 1Th), and P66 (about two-thirds of John). P75 (also c. 200, now in the Bodmer Library in Geneva) contains most of Luke and more than half of John. P45, P46, and P47 constitute the so-called Chester Beatty Papyri, purchased by Beatty in Egypt in the 1930s. Together, they contain fragments of all the New Testament books. Of more recent discovery are the Martin Bodmer papyri (P66, P72, P74, P75—previously mentioned), which have been published since 1954. All have lacunae—places from which the manuscript material, and thus the text, is missing. There are also papyrus manuscripts of the Old Testament and of many literary works from antiquity (of which Homer is the most frequently attested).

B. Uncials

“Uncial” is a technical term for third-to tenth-century codices of the Bible written in majuscule, or capital letters, on parchment or vellum. Technically, papyrus manuscripts are also uncials, but are designated, instead, by the material on which they are written. The uncial style of writing was ordinarily reserved for formal and literary documents. The Gospels, Acts, and some other books of the New Testament were probably written in the literary, uncial hand. Although the autographs of Paul’s letters were most likely written in the cursive hand of private correspondence, they were probably copied very quickly in uncial as literary works. At any rate, even the earliest known manuscripts of the New Testament are in uncial form. Four of the most important uncials of the New Testament and certain extracanonical writings (in whole or part) are Vaticanus—also referred to as (B), Sinaiticus (a), Bezae (D), and Alexandrinus (A).

1. Codex Vaticanus is a fourth-century vellum manuscript which has been housed in the Vatican library since at least 1481. The text is Alexandrian (or Neutral), and because of its antiquity, state of preservation, and text-type it is extremely valuable as a textual source. Unfortunately, the manuscript ends at Hebrews 9:14. The books missing, in addition to the balance of Hebrews, are Philemon, the Pastoral Epistles, and Revelation. Also absent from the text are the longer ending of Mark (16:9-20) and the “pericope de adultera” (Jn 7:53-8:11). The General Epistles precede the letters of Paul and follow the Acts of the Apostles.

2. Codex Sinaiticus is a fourth-century vellum manuscript of portions of the Old Testament and the whole New Testament. The text is Alexandrian. Absent from the text is the longer ending of Mark and the pericope de adulterum. The Pauline Epistles follow the Gospels, then Hebrews, the Pastoral Epistles, Acts, the General Epistles, and Revelation, followed by the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas.

3. Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis is a fifth-century Greek-Latin manuscript of the Gospels and Acts. It received its name from Theodore Bezae and the University of Cambridge to which he presented it in 1581, having acquired it from St. Irenaeus’ monastery in Lyon, France. Its origin is unknown, but it is probably western Mediterranean. The text is filled with innumerable orthographic and grammatical errors, but is of interest because of its omissions in Luke and its additions in the book of Acts, which is one-tenth longer than the Neutral text.
4. Codex Alexandrinus is a fifth-century manuscript of the Greek Bible, presently housed in the British Museum. The text-type in the New Testament is both Byzantine (Gospels) and Alexandrian (Acts and Epistles). Most of Matthew is missing, as are John 6:50-8:52 and 2 Corinthians 4:13-12:6. The manuscript includes 1 and 2 Clement and contains, along with P47, one of the best texts of the book of Revelation.

C. Minuscules

“Minuscule” denotes a manuscript written in small, cursive letters, first used for codices of the Bible c. A.D. 800 until after the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. This style predominated after the tenth century and now constitutes more than nine-tenths of all known manuscripts. The earliest dated manuscript of the New Testament bears the year A.D. 835. The most important minuscules are known as Family 1 and Family 13. Manuscripts are designated by Arabic numerals without a preceding zero (for example, 1, 118, 131, 209, etc.), extending at present to c. 2700 for the New Testament. The following are some of the most significant minuscules:

1. Codex 1 is a twelfth-century codex now in Basel, one of five or six manuscripts used by Erasmus in preparing his first edition of the Greek New Testament. Manuscripts 118, 131, 209, and 1582 have texts very similar to that of 1, and the five manuscripts together are known as Family 1.

2. Codex 13, written in the thirteenth century, is now in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. The closely related manuscripts of 13, 69, 124, 346, 543, and a few others are known as Family 13.

3. Codex 33, a ninth-century manuscript, also at Paris, has been called the “Queen of the Cursive” because of the superior quality of its text.

4. Codex 565, Codex Purpureus Petropolitanus (i.e., “the purple codex of St. Petersburg”), is a manuscript of the ninth or tenth century in the public library of Leningrad. It is written in gold letters on purple vellum, perhaps for Empress Theodora.

D. Ancient Versions

In textual criticism, the term “version” denotes an early translation of the New Testament from Greek into another language. The earliest New Testament versions are in Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, Ethiopic, Persian, Gothic, Georgian, and Slavonic. We will discuss the most important.

1. Old Latin (Vetus Latina) is the name given to approximately thirty manuscripts that antedate or are otherwise independent of the Latin Vulgate (siglum: vg) that Jerome completed in A.D. 405. The Old Latin texts are highly divergent, and no single manuscript contains the whole New Testament. The oldest, Codex Vercellensis (siglum: a), dates from the fourth century. The sigla for Old Latin manuscripts are lower-case letters: a, b, c, etc.
2. Vulgate is the name given to that version of the Latin Bible recognized by the medieval church and later by the Council of Trent (1546) to be the vetus et vulgata editio (the old and popular edition). The Council decreed that it was to be the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. Most of the books of this version stem from Jerome (c. 340-420), who undertook the translation of the Bible at the bidding of Pope Damascus (382). His translations, completed in 405, circulated separately until bound in a single volume in the mid-sixth century. The bound editions included some translations not attributable to Jerome. All the Old Testament is from Jerome; but of the Apocrypha only Tobit and Judith, and of the New Testament only the Gospels, can be ascribed with certainty to Jerome. The remainder comes from the Old Latin versions.

3. Coptic is the language of native Egyptian Christians, and is written in an alphabet mainly derived from Greek. As Christianity spread to these circles at an early date, it made contact with Coptic, the popular language, enriched by Greek loanwords. There are several dialects of Coptic, so there are quite different versions grouped together under the name Coptic. The earliest was undoubtedly the Sahidic version of Upper (i.e., southern) Egypt, translated from the Greek about the middle of the third century A.D., and probably undertaken at the official request of the church. This was followed by Akhmimic, which was based upon the Sahidic, and later in the fourth century by the Bohairic (Lower Egyptian), which was translated from the Greek independently of the Sahidic. For textual criticism, these versions are valuable for their antiquity.

4. Peshitta is the authorized Bible of the Syrian Church, dating from the late fourth or early fifth century and traditionally ascribed to Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa (d. 435). Omitted from early manuscripts of the Peshitta are 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, which the Syrian church did not accept as canonical.

5. Armenian. At the beginning of the fifth century, after a period in which the national Armenian church used Greek and Syriac for both literature and liturgy, the Armenian priest Mesrob (c. 361-439) invented the Armenian alphabet. This laid the basis for a national Armenian literature, and at the same time the Bible was translated. According to Armenian tradition, for which there is good evidence, the first version (c. A.D. 414) was based on the Syriac Peshitta and was very soon revised.

6. Arabic. With the victory of Islam, the use of Arabic spread rapidly, and for Jews and Christians in conqueror lands it became the language of daily life. This gave rise to the need for an Arabic version, which was met by a number of versions, mainly independent and concerned primarily with interpretation. Only a part of the version by Saadia Gaon of Egypt has survived, which was based on the Hebrew text. For the Gospels, there are many translations; the earliest may be from the pre-Islamic period. The premier codex is Vatican arab. 13, whose oldest portions are ninth century and include portions of the Gospels and all the Pauline Epistles. Evidence that the Old Syriac version was the basis for the Arabic version is found in a number of codices, e.g., Vatican arab. 13, Sinai arab. 82, Vatican arab. 82, and Berl. or. quart. 2101.

7. Ethiopic. About the middle of the fourth century Ezana, king of Aksum in Ethiopia,
his people were won over to Christianity. A translation of the Bible was probably begun shortly afterward, with the translators working from a variety of sources, even within single passages, possibly using the Syriac and Hebrew alongside the Greek. But the completion of the version took quite a long time, several centuries according to some. It is open to question how far the original version is represented in surviving manuscripts, the earliest of which is from the thirteenth century.

The value of a version in determining the original text of the Bible is limited in certain respects, since, like the New Testament autographs, all the original manuscripts of the versions are lost. Extant manuscripts must also be subjected to textual criticism to determine, as nearly as possible, the original wording of the version.

E. Patristic Citations

Patristics is the branch of theological study that deals with the writings of the Fathers (patres). In strict usage, it belongs to those teachers who wrote somewhere between the end of the first century (when the writing of the New Testament had been almost, if not totally completed) and the close of the eighth century. This is the period commonly known as the patristic age. The leading Fathers were the authors of much work vital to Christianity. They defended the Gospel against heresies and misunderstandings; they composed extensive commentaries on the Bible, explanatory, doctrinal, and practical, and published innumerable sermons; they exhibited the meaning and implications of the creeds; they recorded past and current events in church history; and they related the Christian faith to the best thought of their age.

Patristic quotations furnish an additional basis for evaluating readings of the New Testament. So able and energetic were the early church fathers that the whole text of the Greek New Testament could probably be recovered from the quotations found in their writings. But, as in the case of the versions, some questions and cautions must be noted in the use of patristic quotations. Was it the writer’s habit to quote carefully? Does he appear to have copied from a New Testament manuscript or did he quote from memory? Also, like the versions, a church father’s use of a particular text is evidence that the text was known in the region where he lived and during his lifetime.

F. Lectionaries

At a very early date, much of the New Testament was divided into sections designated as Scripture readings for the days of the church year. Later, manuscripts called lectionaries were prepared, in which the New Testament was arranged, not in its usual order of books and chapters, but in the order of these readings for each day of the year or for each Saturday and Sunday of the year. Some 2,000 Greek lectionary manuscripts are presently known, two-thirds or more containing Gospel lessons, some containing Gospels and Epistles, and the remainder containing lessons from the Epistles. An appreciable number are written in uncials, dating from the tenth century and later. Not until the middle of the twentieth century, however, was the significance of lectionaries for textual criticism properly identified. Lectionaries are designated by an italic L, or by the abbreviation Lect. and an Arabic number (e.g., L 25; Lect. 299).
III. Canonicity

The New Testament canon is that collection of twenty-seven early Christian writings which, together with the Old Testament canon, is recognized by the Christian church as its Holy Scripture, containing the final, authoritative deposit of divine revelation. These writings are normative for every aspect of the life of the church, be it creed, worship, or its life in the world. The first official recognition of the twenty-seven books of the present New Testament canon as being the New Testament canon of the church did not occur until A.D. 367. One might ask, “How did the church come to recognize these twenty-seven writings as divine unity?”

A. Sources of Authority

There were four focal points of authority in the early church, all of which were ultimately important factors that cooperated to produce the substance of our present canon. These factors included the prior position of the Old Testament canon, the place of the Holy Spirit, the Word of the Lord, and the authoritative position of the apostles.

1. The Old Testament. Prior to the existence of the Christian church, Judaism already possessed what was essentially a canon of sacred writings. Jesus Himself paved the way for the church’s acceptance of the Jewish canon by His constant appeal to the Old Testament. His basic affirmation was that the Old Testament, as a whole and in its parts, had come to fulfillment in Him (Mt 5:17; cf. Lk 24:27; Jn 5:39). For the apostle Paul, the reading of the Old Testament could be meaningful only in the light of the historical Jesus (1Co 10:1-4).

2. The Holy Spirit. The church experienced the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of Christ” (2Co 3:17), and it was to Christ that all Scripture testified. Indeed, the Spirit gave to holy ones of old the inspiration (2Pe 1:21; 2Ti 3:16) that led to the production of the components of the Old Testament canon. So understood, the age of the Spirit is rather to be seen as a catalyst for the production and recognition of new Scriptures. If inspired believers of old looked forward to the Messiah’s coming, how much more could Christians filled with the Spirit use the written Word to look back on the Messiah’s advent!

3. The Word of the Lord. The ultimate authority of the early church was the living authority of the risen Lord Himself. On a number of occasions, Paul appeals directly to the words of the Lord (1Th 4:15; 1Co 7:10; 9:14; 11:23; cf. Ac 20:35). Similar direct appeal to the teaching of Jesus continued into the postapostolic age (cf., e.g., 1 Clem 13:2; 46:8; Didache 8:2; 9:5; Ign. Smyrn. 3:2). The exact historical background of the words of the Lord is given in the Gospels, and is very important in relation to any discussion of the canon. Jesus is clearly pictured as the teacher of a select group of disciples, who undoubtedly remembered His sayings and teachings and treasured them far more than the sayings of any other Jewish rabbi, for “No one ever spoke the way this man does” (Jn 7:46). It should be noted, too, that even the deeds of Jesus had a didactic thrust. As enacted parables, so to speak, they were likewise treasured.

4. The Apostles. The apostles constituted a fourth source of authority for the church from its earliest days. The authority of the apostles was already granted to them by Jesus before
Easter (Mk 3:14; 6:7). After Easter, the apostles manifested this authority in their dual witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and to His work and words (Ac 1:21-23; 1Co 9:1-3). For this task, they received the gift of the Spirit.

In the final analysis, it was the historical verification of apostolic authorship, or influence, and the universal consensus of the church, guided by the Holy Spirit, that resulted in the final decision concerning what books would be considered canonical and worthy of inclusion in what we know today as the New Testament.

B. Development of the Canon

Apparently, the epistles of Paul were first collected by leaders in the church of Ephesus. This collection was followed by the accumulation of the Gospels, sometime after the beginning of the second century. The so-called Muratorian Canon, discovered by Lodovico A. Muratori (1672-1750) and housed now in the Ambrosian Library at Milan, was dated about 180. Twenty-two books of the New Testament were looked upon as canonical.

Eusebius (about 324) thought that at least twenty books of the New Testament were acceptable on the same level as the books of the Old Testament. James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation were among the books whose place in the canon was still under consideration. The delay in placing these books was caused primarily by an uncertainty concerning questions of authorship.

Athanasius, however, in his Easter letter of 367 to the churches under his jurisdiction as the bishop of Alexandria, listed as canonical the same twenty-seven books that we now have in the New Testament canon. Later councils, such as that at Carthage in 397, merely approved and gave uniform expression to what was already an accomplished fact, which was generally accepted by the church over a long period of time. The slowness with which the church accepted Hebrews and Revelation as canonical indicates the care and devotion with which it dealt with this question.

IV. New Testament Settings (Part 1)

To have a full, adequate understanding of the New Testament, one must have a working knowledge of Israel’s closing kingdom years, the 70 years of the Babylonian exile, the postexilic era, and the period between the testaments. In the last 200 years of Israel’s canonical history and the subsequent 400-year interval, many significant political and religious developments took place within the biblical world. The physical setting of the Bible is one of the best reminders to us that its message is about real people, living in real places, in real time. That is why a knowledge of geography is a key ingredient in having a true understanding of the Bible’s background. The New Testament world was a Roman world. The geographical location of Palestine in ancient times was strategic, and Jerusalem was at the heart of Palestine.

A. A Roman World

The Mediterranean world in the first century was a Roman world. The empire extended from
Babylon in the east to Spain in the west and from northern Europe to North Africa. Ever since 265 B.C., when Rome gained control of Italy, it had sought to extend its political influence. When it destroyed Hannibal (247-183 B.C.) and the Carthaginian Empire, it absorbed Spain and North Africa. Moving toward the east, through war and voluntary surrender, it was able to annex Macedonia, Achaia, Asia Minor, Syria, and Judea. Its northern border was extended with the conquest of Gaul. In the year of the birth of Caesar Augustus, the Roman general Pompey was able to take the supposedly impregnable fortress of Jerusalem. By the year 14 B.C. Jerusalem was part of a province governed by a Roman prefect, whose capital was named Caesarea (Maritima).

B. Palestine

The geographical location of Palestine in Bible times was strategic. Of that, G. T. Manley writes, “Palestine lay on the cross-roads of ancient civilization. The highway from Egypt to Syria and beyond, which ran through Palestine, was one of the most important roads in the ancient world both for commerce and for strategy, and its importance has not yet disappeared” (*The New Bible Handbook*, p. 425).

Palestine lies within the region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert (34°-36° east longitude) and between Sinai and the mountains of Lebanon (29°50’-33°30’ north latitude), within the southern portion of the Temperate Zone. Situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, it is part of the Levant (the Levantine states are usually considered Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine or Israel). Palestine is located at the southwestern end of the Fertile Crescent, the fertile lands extending along the Tigris-Euphrates Valley and the Levant.

C. Jerusalem

Jerusalem is situated on the central mountain ridge of Palestine, almost exactly opposite of the northern tip of the Dead Sea, thirty-six miles east of the Mediterranean Sea and sixteen miles west of the Dead Sea (as the crow flies). The city’s altitude is between 2,100 and 2,526 feet above sea level. Just north of the city Mount Scopus rises to about 2,690 feet, and just south of the city Jebel Mukabbir (Hill of Evil Counsel) rises to 2,936 feet. East of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, the Mount of Olives reaches an elevation of 2,684 feet.

The basic area of the city resembles a square with no definite top line. The eastern side is marked by the ravine of the Kidron Valley. The western and southern sides of the square are formed by the Valley of Hinnom. The rectangular area between the valleys is marked by deep ravines on the east and south, and shallower ones on the west. Thus any attack on the city would normally come from the north, and any growth of the city had to be toward the north and northwest.

It is exceedingly difficult for modern visitors to visualize what Jerusalem was like just before and during the Herodian period (at the time of Christ). (1) First, the walls of the Old City are not where they were then; at least the southern wall is much further north, and the northern wall is probably much further north as well. As a result, the Old City has shifted somewhere between 1,000 to 2,000 feet north of the site of the Herodian city. (2) Secondly, the Haram
(Islamic sacred area) does not give a true picture of the temple area. It is larger, occupying the enlarged temple platform built by Herod, and much more open than it was when Herod began his building. (3) Third, the Central Valley has been almost completely filled in. Its location is still identified as el-Wad, the street with shops, running through the city from the Damascus Gate to the Dung Gate. (4) Fourth, the modern level is considerably higher than it was in the first century. At the southwest corner of the Haram, the modern ground level is about sixty-six feet above the level of the Herodian street, and the original bed of the Central Valley (about where the wall of the Old City abuts the south wall of the Haram), was about 100 feet lower. As a result, no clear picture emerges of the Upper City on the west and the deep ravine that separated it from the Lower City (David’s City) on the east. (5) Fifth, the filling of St. Anne’s Valley (done to complete the rectangular shape of the temple platform), the alteration of the topography around the Antonia, and the quarrying of stone have all changed the northeast end of the Old City. The best way to get a clear idea of what the Herodian city was like is to visit Avi-Yonah’s scale model of Jerusalem on the grounds of the Holy Land Hotel in the western suburb of Jerusalem.

We will continue to learn more about the New Testament settings in our next lesson.
Discussion Questions

A friend approaches you and wants to know why our Bible does not include the Gospel of Thomas. Now that you have studied this lesson (feel free to review the transcript), what would you tell him about how the books in the New Testament were identified as canonical?

Describe, in your own words, who the early church fathers were and what their importance was to the Christian church.

Why is it important to understand the things you learned about in this lesson — how the New Testament was developed, the different ancient versions, how canonicity was determined, and the setting for the writing of the New Testament? How can having a better understanding of these concepts help you in your study of the New Testament and in your witness to others?
Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Read Chapter 59: “Calling of the Saints” (Ephesians)

Philip Yancey Devotional
Food That Endures - John 6:22-71

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. . . . This is the bread that came down from heaven. Our forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever. (John 6:54, 58)

All four Gospels include an account of the feeding of the 5000, but John adds the most detail. He describes the effect of the miracle on the ordinary people who saw it. At first, dazzled by the miracle, they tried to crown Jesus king. Characteristically, he slipped away, but the persistent crowd commandeered a few boats and sailed across a lake in pursuit.

The next day when the crowds caught up with him, Jesus met them with a blunt warning, “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

That response shows why Jesus distrusted sensation-seeking crowds: They cared far more for physical spectacle than for spiritual truth. And what happened next certainly bears out His suspicion. As He was interpreting the spiritual meaning of the miracle, all the enthusiasm of the previous day melted away. The crowd grew downright restless when He openly avowed His true identity as the one sent from God. They could not reconcile such exalted claims (“I have come down from heaven.”) with their knowledge that He was a local man, whose mother and father they knew.

Jesus used the miracle they had seen firsthand as a way of introducing His topic of the bread of life (His words were later applied to the Lord’s Supper). But in the end the crowd—who had proof of Jesus’ supernatural power digesting in their bellies—abandoned Him, unbelieving. Many of his disciples turned back too, never to follow Him again.

Life Question: Why did the crowd take offense at Jesus? Why do people take offense at Him today?
Glossary

**Athanasius** — Athanasius lived from c. 296 to 373. He was bishop of Alexandria. By his refusal to compromise with Arianism he incurred the enmity of the powerful Arianizing party in the reigns of Constantine and Constantius.

**Carthage** — An ancient city and state founded by the Phoenicians in North Africa on the coast, northeast of modern Tunis.

**Herodian Period** — During the reign of Alexander Janneus (103-76 B.C.), a Hasmonean king of Israel, the Herodians began their influence in leadership. Herod the Great’s (37-4 B.C.) great grandfather, Antipater, was appointed governor of Idumea by Alexander Janneus. Herodian influence concluded with Agrippa II (A.D. 50-100).

**Siglum** — (sigla) - Sign(s) for words, abbreviations, and symbols used in the critical apparatus of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament texts.
Quiz

1. Codex Vaticanus:
   A. Is not a fourth-century vellum manuscript
   B. Was unknown before the eighteenth century
   C. Is not housed in the public library of Leningrad
   D. Is not a very valuable textual source

2. Coptic is not:
   A. The language of native Egyptian Christians
   B. Written in an alphabet derived from Greek
   C. Written in an alphabet derived from Hebrew
   D. Found in more than one dialect

3. Jerome undertook his translation of the Bible at the urging of Pope:
   A. Alexander
   B. Benedict
   C. Clement
   D. Damascus

4. New Testament manuscripts are categorized by a system initiated by:
   A. Sophocles
   B. Martin Luther
   C. J. J. Wettstein
   D. Augustine

5. Palestine lies within the region that is between the Mediterranean Sea and this desert:
   A. Sahara
   B. Paran
   C. Arabian
   D. Sinai

6. There are no ancient Arabic versions of the Bible.
   A. True
   B. False

7. The Greek of the New Testament is:
   A. Classical Attic
   B. Only known from biblical manuscripts
   C. Koine
   D. The same as the modern idiom
8. In what way is the modern city of Jerusalem different from what it was like during Jesus’ time?
   A. The Old City has shifted north.
   B. The Haram (Islamic sacred area) is larger and more open than the original temple area.
   C. The modern ground level is higher.
   D. All of the above

9. The source of authority in the early church was:
   A. The Word of the Lord
   B. The Holy Spirit
   C. The apostles
   D. All of the above

10. These forms of manuscripts are the earliest extant witnesses to the New Testament:
    A. Papyrus
    B. Uncials
    C. Minuscules
    D. Ancient lectionaries