

Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain, Identical or Distinct

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INTRODUCTION

Question of This Paper

It is clear that there are many similarities between the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5:1-8:1 and the Sermon on the Plain is found in Luke 6:17-49, but are these sermons identical or distinct? In other words, do Matthew and Luke record the same sermon, or different sermons?

Outline of This Paper

- I. MAJOR ELEMENTS INVOLVED IN THIS QUESTION
- II. IMPLICATIONS OF THE IDENTICAL POSITION
- III. IMPLICATIONS OF THE DISTINCT POSITION
- IV. WHERE HARMONISTS WEIGH IN
- V. CONCLUSIONS

I. MAJOR ELEMENTS INVOLVED IN THIS QUESTION

Setting

The immediately preceding verses to these sermons would at first glance seem to describe their settings.

^{NAU} Matthew 4:23 - 5:1

^{4:23} Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.

²⁴ The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs,

epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and *the* Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and *from* beyond the Jordan.

^{5:1} When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him.

^{NAU} Luke 6:17-19

¹⁷ Jesus came down with them (*the Twelve who were chosen earlier that morning*) and stood on a level place; and *there was* a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. ¹⁹ And all the people were trying to touch Him, for power was coming from Him and healing *them* all.

There are several major elements to consider in the apparent settings of these sermons.

HEALING

Matthew and Luke both include an occasion of healing.

THE TWELVE

Luke 6:12-16 records the choosing of the Twelve on the mountain. The next verse, Luke 6:17, records that Jesus descended with the Twelve (μετ' αὐτῶν) and met the crowd. Notice particularly that Matthew does not record the choosing of the Twelve before the Sermon on the Mount but does record his own initial calling in *Matthew 9:9*.

^{NAU} Matthew 9:9

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him.

AUDIENCE

Matthew records large crowds "from Galilee and *the* Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and *from* beyond the Jordan." Luke records "a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon."

THE MOUNTAIN & JESUS' POSTURE

Matthew records that Jesus went up on the mountain and sat down. Luke records that Jesus came down from the mountain and stood on a level place.

Content

LENGTH

The Sermon on the Mount has 112 verses, The Sermon on the Plain has only 33.

THE BEATITUDES

Matthew records eight Beatitudes:

Chart #1

The Beatitudes in Matthew		
Number	Verse	NAU
1	5:3	Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2	5:4	Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
3	5:5	Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.
4	5:6	Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
5	5:7	Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
6	5:8	Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
7	5:9	Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
8	5:10-12	Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ Blessed are you when <i>people</i> insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Notice that Matthew phrases all of these in the third person.

On the other hand Luke records four Beatitudes with corresponding woes. (I have numbered these in Luke according to Matthew's order.)

Chart #2

The Beatitudes in Luke		
Number	Verses	NAU
1	6:20	Blessed <i>are you who are</i> poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
	6:24	But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full.
4	6:21a	Blessed <i>are you who</i> hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.
	6:25a	Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry.
2	6:21b	Blessed <i>are you who</i> weep now, for you shall laugh.
	6:25b	Woe <i>to you who</i> laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.
8	6:22	Blessed are you when men hate you
	6:26	Woe <i>to you</i> when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.

Notice that Luke phrases all of these in the second person.

TEACHING

These two sermons do contain much teaching that is similar between them but also with other passages in the Gospels. The following chart identifies all of those similarities.

(Note: References on the same line indicate that the passages are “parallel” {two or more evangelists relating the same words or events}. References on different lines this indicates that the passages are “similar” {two or more evangelists relating different words or events}.) I have also placed the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain on different lines.)

Chart #3

Similar Teaching - Matthew 5:1-8:1 and Luke 6:17-49				
Matt.	Mk.	Lk.	Jn.	Content
5:2-12				The Beatitudes
		6:20-23		
5:13	9:49-50			Salt losing its saltiness
		14:34-35a		
5:15	4:21	8:16		Lamp under a bowl or basket
		11:33		
5:18				One stroke or letter of the Law
		16:17		
5:25-26				Settle quickly with your legal opponent
		12:58-59		
5:29-30				If your right hand causes you to sin
18:8-9	9:43-47			
5:31-32				Divorce and adultery
19:3-9	10:2-12			
		16:18		
5:34				Swearing by heaven, God's throne
23:22				
5:38-48				Love your enemies
		6:27-36		
6:9-13				The Lord's Prayer
		11:2-4		
6:19-21				Treasures on earth or in heaven
		12:33b-34		
6:22-23a				Eye is the lamp of the body
		11:34		
6:24				Cannot serve God and money
		16:13		
6:26				Consider the birds
		12:24		
6:25-33				Don't worry, seek first His kingdom
		12:22-25, 27-31		
7:1-2a				Do not judge, or you will be judged
		6:37-38		

(Chart #3 contd.)

7:2b				It will be measured to you with your measure
	4:24b			
		6:38b		
15:14		6:39		Blind leading the blind
10:24		6:40		A student is not above his teacher
			13:16	
			15:20a	
7:3-5				Sawdust and plank
		6:41-42		
7:7-11				Ask, seek, knock
		11:9-13		
7:12a				Do to others what you would have them do to you
		6:31		
7:13-14				Narrow gate/door
		13:24		
7:16-20				Good tree good fruit, bad tree bad fruit
12:33-35				
		6:43-45		
7:21, 24-27				"Lord, Lord" / House built on the rock
		6:46-49		
7:23				"I never knew you."
		13:27		
25:12				

Notice that much Jesus' teaching found in the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain is similar to His teaching throughout the Gospels (including His last journey to Jerusalem in Luke 9:51-19:28).

STRUCTURE

Both sermons have a distinctly similar structure. The both begin with Beatitudes, and contain some teaching that is similar, and end with the illustration of the house built on the rock.

Proximity

If Matthew and Luke record the same sermon then the two are not just proximate in time, they are identical.

If Matthew and Luke record different sermons then they were given within a close time proximity to one another. The evidence for this comes from the most natural ordering of events when outlining Matthew alone or when outlining Luke alone. When the two gospels are then compared the Sermon on the Mount appears earlier than the Sermon on the Plain, but not very much earlier.

II. IMPLICATIONS OF THE IDENTICAL POSITION

If you accept the position that these two sermons are identical then you must also accept the implications of this position. As you will see, doing so creates some huge interpretive problems.

Setting

HEALING

The rearrangement of Matthew 4:23-25 in the standard harmonization pattern today separates the Sermon on the Mount from the context of healing in that Gospel. These records of healing found in Matthew and Luke before their respective sermons would then have occurred on two different occasions. I will illustrate this later in the upcoming chart.

THE TWELVE

Jesus chose the Twelve in Luke 6:12-16, the morning of the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:17-49. Considering the two sermons as identical would require that His initial calling of Matthew in Matthew 9:9 be placed chronologically before the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1.

I stated above that the most natural ordering of events when outlining Matthew alone or when outlining Luke alone leads to a slightly earlier placement of the Sermon on the Mount than the Sermon on the Plain. If the two sermons are identical then a choice must be made. Should Matthew's account be moved forward in his gospel to match Luke's placement, should Luke's be moved back to Matthew's, or should both sermons be moved?

The harmonization pattern commonly accepted today is that of A.T. Robertson. I have shown his arrangement of passages in this area of the Gospels.

Chart #4

A.T. Robertson ¹				
Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	Comments
8:14-17	1:29-34	4:38-41		All three Synoptics refer to healing here.
4:23-25	1:35-39	4:42-44		Matthew's reference to healing is here.
8:2-4	1:40-45	5:12-16		
9:1-8	2:1-12	5:17-26		
9:9-13	2:13-17	5:27-32		This is Jesus' initial calling of Matthew.
9:14-17	2:18-22	5:33-39		
			5:1-47	
12:1-14	2:23-3:6	6:1-11		
12:15-21	3:7-12			
	3:13-19a	6:12-16		
5:1-2		6:17-19		Luke's reference to healing is here.
5:3-12		6:20-26		
5:13-21				
5:22-48		6:27-30, 32-36		
6:1-34				
7:1-6		6:37-42		
7:7-12		6:31		
7:13 - 8:1		6:43-49		

Notice the placement of Matthew 4:23-25 is linked with an earlier occasion of healing, the placement of Matthew's initial calling in Matthew 9:9 falls before Matthew 5:1, and the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain are identified as identical.

Thirty-nine of the forty harmonists in my bibliography who have taken the position that the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain are identical move Matthew forward to meet Luke. Only Fieldhouse does the reverse. (It is interesting to note that of these thirty-nine harmonies, only the four by Wieseler (1864), Besse (1901), Coulter (1974), and Fieldhouse (n.d.) place Matthew 9:9 *after* Matthew 5:1-8:1.)

The pattern of moving Matthew forward to meet Luke is an ancient one. It seen in LeClerc's harmony of 1701.² In fact, the first record of this pattern is with Tatian in the second century.³

¹ A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1950).

² John LeClerc, *The Harmony of the Evangelists* (London, 1701).

³ Samuel Hemphill, *The Diatessaron of Tatian: A Harmony of the Four Holy Gospels Compiled in the Third Quarter of the Second Century* (London; Hodder & Stoughton, 1888).

Here is the reasoning for the majority view as I understand it. When a harmonization of Matthew 8:2-13:58 is attempted with Mark and Luke (John has no parallels for these verses), a difficulty becomes immediately obvious. There are thirteen packets of verses within which Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree. However Mark and Luke order these packets differently than does Matthew. Through a line of reasoning, which is outside the scope of this paper, it can be reasonably determined that Mark and Luke likely have the correct sequence and that Matthew's packets are out of chronological order.⁴

If the verses which are immediately prior to Matthew 8:2 are also to be considered one such packet (i.e. Matthew 5:1-8:1), then those verses *may* also be out of chronological order and *could* be moved forward to meet Luke. One important observation to make is that though the other packets in Matthew *must* of necessity be moved out of Matthew's sequence to match Mark and Luke's, the Sermon on the Mount does not. Broadus wrote that as Matthew 8:2-13:58 is arranged topically rather than chronologically, "it is entirely possible, *even likely*, that the same arrangement should prevail in ch. 5-7."⁵ (emphasis mine) Even though Broadus used the word "likely," this statement is founded on his foregone conclusion that the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the plain are identical, not on any words he cites in Matthew or Luke. Take note also that A.T. Robertson's classic harmony *is* the harmony of John Broadus with very few revisions *in placements or notes*.

AUDIENCE

The descriptions of the audience by both Matthew and Luke are different, but not all that different. They could be the same.

THE MOUNTAIN & JESUS' POSTURE

Matthew records Jesus going up on the mountain and sitting down. Luke records Jesus ascending the mountainside, praying, choosing the Twelve, descending to a level place, and standing. These two are NOT irreconcilable, though they do require some slight interpretive gymnastics to see them as two records of the same events. Matthew is seen as skipping the details of the ascent that Luke includes, and records Jesus sitting after He initially stood.

Content

LENGTH

Luke's account is definitely briefer, but that should pose absolutely no problem if the two sermons are identical. Luke's account would merely be a

⁴ Robert A. Singer, *A New Harmonization of the Gospels, Rethinking the Common Approach* (Western Seminary, unpublished D.Min. product, 1997) 3-5.

⁵ John A. Broadus, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1893), 246.

shorter record of Jesus' teaching, *including His flow of thought*. There doesn't seem to be any problem as long as broad patterns are compared, but there are major problems when the specifics of Jesus' teaching in the two sermons are compared.

THE BEATITUDES

A small problem does exist with the Beatitudes in that Matthew and Luke ordered them differently, but there are a couple of nearly impossible difficulties with the combination of Matthew and Luke's record.

Luke's account includes parallel woe's with the Beatitudes. Consider the first Beatitude in Matthew with its supposed parallel in Luke.

Chart #5

The 1st Beatitude in Matthew (and Luke)		
Number	Verse	NAU
1	Matthew 5:3	Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
1	Luke 6:20	Blessed <i>are you who are</i> poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
	Luke 6:24	But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full.

Luke's corresponding woe would force the meaning: "But woe to you who are rich *in spirit*, for you are receiving your comfort in full." How should this be interpreted?

Consider also the fourth Beatitude in Matthew.

Chart #6

The 4 th Beatitude in Matthew (and Luke)		
Number	Verse	NAU
4	Luke 5:6	Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
4	Luke 6:21a	Blessed <i>are you who</i> hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.
	Luke 6:25a	Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry.

Luke's corresponding woe would force the meaning: "Woe to you who are well-fed *with righteousness* now, for you shall be hungry." How should this be interpreted?

I suppose it could be postulated that being "rich *in spirit*" and being "well-fed *with righteousness*" are really tongue-in-cheek comments referring to a false estimations of one's self, but these interpretations would in themselves create another problem. Since it is absolutely impossible to arrive at these interpretations, or even any hint of them, from Luke's account alone, then Luke's use of language to communicate ideas and our understanding of the infallibility of scripture would be severely diminished. Other postulated interpretations raise the same specter.

The most natural meanings of Luke's words are references to actual poverty and hunger. Matthew's are not.

TEACHING

There is another huge problem with Matthew's line of thought in 7:3-20. Note his use of the second person in these verses.

The Speck in Your Brother's Eye

NIV Matthew 7:3-5

3 "Why do *you* look at the speck of sawdust in *your* brother's eye and *pay no attention* to the plank in *your* own eye? 4 How can *you* say to *your* brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in *your* own eye? 5 *You* hypocrite, first *take* the plank out of *your* own eye, and then *you* will see clearly to remove the speck from *your* brother's eye.

Throwing Pearls to Pigs

NIV Matthew 7:6

6 "*Do not give* dogs what is sacred; *do not throw your* pearls to pigs. If *you* do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear *you* to pieces.

Ask, Seek, Knock and the Golden Rule

NIV Matthew 7:7-12

7 "*Ask* and it will be given to *you*; *seek* and *you* will find; *knock* and the door will be opened to *you*. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

9 "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If *you*, then, though *you are* evil, *know* how to give good gifts to *your* children, how much more will *your* Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! 12 So in everything, *do* to others what *you* would have them do to *you*, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

The Narrow and Wide Gates

NIV Matthew 7:13-14

13 "*Enter* through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

There has been clear use of the second person to this point. Now also notice his emphasis on the third person.

False Prophets, Good and Bad Fruit

NIV Matthew 7:15-20

15 "*Watch* out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

The reference of Matthew 7:16a ("by their fruit you will recognize them") and 7:20 ("Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them") is clearly to the false prophets of the previous verse. These false prophets are most naturally understood in Matthew as being outside the community of the saved.

Now consider the similar words in the Sermon on the Plain.

The Speck in Your Brother's Eye

NIV Luke 6:41-42

41 "Why do you *look* at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and *pay no attention* to the plank in your own eye? 42 How *can you* say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first *take* the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

There is no problem to this point, but look closely at the next three verses in Luke.

Good and Bad Fruit

NIV Luke 6:43-45

43 " (γὰρ) No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. 44 (γὰρ) Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. (γὰρ) People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. 45 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things

out of the evil stored up in his heart. For (γάρ) out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.

Jesus, by using γάρ to introduce the thoughts of Luke 6:43-45, gives the reason why His disciples should pay attention to removing the plank from their own eye before attempting to remove a speck of sawdust from their brother's eye. Luke does *not* use the term, "false prophet."

Daniel Wallace writes concerning γάρ, "'The *coordinate* conjunction links equal elements together, e.g., a subject (or other part of speech) to a subject (or other part of speech), sentence to sentence, or paragraph to paragraph" and he notes that γάρ is one of the most common conjunctions for this.⁶

A.T. Robertson even wrote, "The Greeks, especially in the literary style, felt the propriety of indicating the inner relation of the various independent sentences that composed a paragraph. This was not merely an artistic device, but a logical expression of coherence of thought. Particles like... γάρ... were very common in this connection."⁷

For those who hold the two sermons to be identical there is now a clear problem. A way has to be found to connect Matthew's flow of thought in 7:3-5 (plank and sawdust) to 7:15-20 (false prophets and fruit). After all, Luke connects the two discussions in his Gospel with "γάρ" and clearly establishes Jesus' intent to link them. But, trying to add throwing pearls to pigs; ask, seek, knock and the Golden Rule; and the narrow and wide gates into Matthew's flow of thought would have one interpretively bending over backwards double.

There is a more radical solution presented by Wieseler. Broadus wrote, "Wieseler holds that Matthew has simply brought together detached sayings of Jesus on different occasions and does not mean to present the whole as one discourse; Luke's account being only one of the discourses used by Matthew."⁸

An accompanying minor difference in Matthew and Luke's wording also exists.

NIV Matthew 7:16b
Do people pick
grapes (σταφυλάς) from thornbushes (ἀκανθῶν),
or figs (σῦκα) from thistles (τριβόλων)?

Luke 6:44b
"People do not pick
figs (σῦκα) from thornbushes (ἀκανθῶν),
or grapes (σταφυλήν) from briars (βάτου)."

The words are different, and this difference must be adequately explained.

⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 667, 669.

⁷ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 443.

⁸ Broadus, 248-249.

There are clear and intensely problematic differences in the specifics of content that cannot be explained by Luke's shortened account, or the recollection of additional details by Matthew. And consider this. The *only* reason these difficulties exist in the first place is because of the historical position that the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain are identical.

STRUCTURE

On the surface these two sermons have a similar structure, but as already put forward the real proof is in the specifics, not in the general pattern.

Proximity

Seeing the two sermons as identical dispatches with the problem of having similar though different sermons so chronologically close to one another.

III. IMPLICATIONS OF THE DISTINCT POSITION

Setting

HEALING

If the two sermons are considered distinct, Matthew retains its context of healing, but these two sermons still represent different healing times since the Sermon on the Plain would be placed later. There were many healing times like this in Jesus' public ministry.

Notice that whether the two sermons are considered identical or distinct, these records of healing are seen to occur on two different occasions.

THE TWELVE

Seeing the sermons as distinct allows Matthew and Luke present their own most natural ordering of events. The Sermon on the Plain naturally falls both after the Sermon on the Mount *and* Matthew 9:9. No rearranging of the order seen in Luke's text is necessary. The differing order of the packets seen in Matthew 8:2-13:58 still stands, but there is no reason to extend that to Matthew 5:1-8:2.

There is an additional minor occurrence that gives a clue that this approach is correct. Similarities in the Gospels are found in preaching, events, and narration. Similarities in preaching are by far the most frequent. There are some similarities in events, and there are just a few similarities in narration. Now let's consider a similar event found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

There are only three passages in all of the Gospels where it is said that the people were amazed at Jesus teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, not as their teachers of the Law.

NIV Matthew 7:28-8:1

28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, 29 because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

8:1 When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him.

NIV Mark 1:21-22, 27

21 They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. 22 The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

27 The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching-- and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."

NIV Luke 4:31-32, 36

31 Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. 32 They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority.

36 All the people were amazed and said to each other, "What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!"

These three passages come together naturally when the sermons are seen as distinct, but are separated when the sermons are viewed as identical. In the following chart I have shown my arrangement of passages in this area of the Gospels.

Chart #7

Robert A. Singer ⁹				
Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	Comments
4:23-25				
5:1-8:1				Sermon on the Mount & "amazed" comment
	1:21-22	4:31-32		"amazed" comment
	1:23-28	4:33-37		"amazed" comment
8:14-18	1:29-38	4:38-43		
	1:39	4:44		

⁹ Singer, 248-251.

(Chart #7 contd.)

8:2-4	1:40-45	5:12-16		
9:1-8	2:1-12	5:17-26		
9:9-13	2:13-17	5:37-32		Matthew's initial calling
12:1-14	2:23-3:6	6:1-11		
12:15-21	3:7-12			
	3:13-19	6:12-16		
		6:17-49		Sermon on the Plain

AUDIENCE

The audiences are similar, but different. This is hinted at in the slightly differing description of each.

THE MOUNTAIN & JESUS' POSTURE

Again, Matthew records that Jesus went up on the mountain and sat down. Luke records that Jesus came down from the mountain and stood on a level place. It is easiest to see these occurrences as distinct.

Content

LENGTH

The length of the accounts does differ, but this is no proof that the sermons are distinct.

THE BEATITUDES

The 1st and 4th Beatitudes in Matthew *must* be different from those in Luke for the reasons seen earlier.

TEACHING

The subject of the "good tree - good fruit, bad tree - bad fruit" teaching is not the same in the two sermons. Jesus simply used two similar illustrations in two different contexts.

STRUCTURE

Jesus was simply using similar, but not identical illustrations in different contexts. Itinerant preachers and evangelists do this all the time. Besides, many of the same stories were used elsewhere in the Gospels, and even in the same Gospel. The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain do share many similarities, but this pattern alone is not sufficient proof to say that they are different.

Proximity

If the two sermons are distinct then the two sermons still were delivered in fairly close time proximity to one another. Why would Jesus do this when many would undoubtedly be present in both crowds? The answer is that Jesus often moved around Galilee preaching. Just as with a visiting preacher today one would expect Him to deliver different sermons with obvious similarities.

If this were the case it also would certainly be natural that neither Matthew nor Luke would include both sermons. They could easily be an example of something commonly found—clearly similar but distinctly different passages found only in different Gospels. I have provided some examples of these in the following chart.

Chart #8

Examples of Clearly Similar but Distinctly Different Passages Found Only in Different Gospels				
Matt.	Mk.	Lk.	Jn.	Content
1:1-17		3:23-38		Jesus' genealogy
21:12-13	11:15-17	19:45-46	2:13-17	Casting money changers from temple
13:54-58	6:1-6a	4:16-30	4:44	Without honor at Nazareth
4:18-22	1:16-20	5:1-11		Fishers of men
10:2-4	3:13-19	6:12-16		The Twelve Apostles listed
26:6-13	14:3-9	7:36-50	12:2-8	Woman with alabaster jar of perfume
25:14-30		19:12-27		Parable of minas, talents

The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain would be an understandable addition to this chart.

IV. WHERE HARMONISTS WEIGH IN

IDENTICAL

The vast majority of harmonists consider these two sermons to be identical. What follows is an extensive sampling of forty-five of their harmonies, which are representative of other harmonies.

Thirty-nine of the forty-five consider the two sermons to be identical. They are: Tatian (2nd cent.), LeClerc (1701), Jarvis (1845), Robinson (1851), Wieseler

(1864), Greenleaf (1874), Davies (1879), Butler (1892), Broadus (1893), Besse (1901), Young (1902), Kerr (1903), Stevens and Burton (1904), Finney (1907), Sharman (1917), Burton and Goodspeed (1920), Robertson (1922), Ylvisaker (1932), Boettner (1933), Goodier (1934), Fahling (1936), Hartdegen (1942), Stringfellow (1943), Heim (1947), Wieand (1947), Roney (1948), Dietz (1951), Beck (1959), Carter (1961), Cheney and Ellisen (1969), Coulter (1974), Smith (1976), Thomas and Gundry (1978), Pentecost (1981), Nevins (1987), Zarley (1987), Fieldhouse (n.d.), McGarvey and Pendleton (n.d.), and Reid (n.d.).

Only six consider the two sermons to be distinct. They are: Greswell (1830), Mimpriss (1833), Clark (1870), Campbell (1899), Ebersol (1937), and Markve (1957). Notice that in the twentieth century only two hold this view, and none do in the past forty-eight years.

Whether through footnotes or appendices, only ten of the thirty-nine harmonies above, which present the two sermons as identical, give any reasons at all for their conclusion. They are: Robinson (1851), Wieseler (1864), Greenleaf (1874), Broadus (1893), Davies (1879), Robertson (1922), Ylvisaker (1932), Hartdegen (1942), Thomas and Gundry (1978), and Zarley (1987). As Davies is merely a distillation of Robinson, and Robertson quotes Broadus nearly verbatim in both placements and notes, we are really left with only eight of the thirty-nine who provide reasons.

Hartdegan writes, "That Matthew and Luke relate the same discourse is evident from the introduction, conclusion, and general arguments, as well as from the use of the same figures of speech."¹⁰ Thomas and Gundry write, "Similarities between the two are too numerous to allow for two different sermons."¹¹ Observe these comments closely. They are comments about generalities of pattern, not specifics of content.

DISTINCT

Conversely, only Greswell (1830) and Mimpriss (1833) give reasons that these two sermons are distinct. And, as Mimpriss is a distillation of Greswell, we really only have the voice of one harmonist who provides his reasoning that the two sermons are distinct, and that from 1830. Greswell is notable because he wrote over 2,500 pages, comprising five volumes, giving reasons for the placements in his harmony. I know of no other harmonist who has accomplished anything like this.

If you stand on the sheer numbers of harmonists supporting either position, and not the text of the Gospels, the choice is obvious. The two sermons are identical. But when the specific content of the sermons is considered then Greswell's voice becomes much more inviting.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Hartdegan, *A Chronological Harmony of the Gospels* (Paterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1942), 45.

¹¹ Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Harper and Row, 1978), 63.

V. CONCLUSIONS

IDENTICAL OR DISTINCT?

A good rule of thumb is that when you start multiplying contrived reasons to support your view, then perhaps you should take a second look at your position no matter how many people support it. This sort of multiplication is required to hold the view that these two sermons are identical. It is true that the two sermons show a marked similarity in structure and that the vast weight of opinion is that they are the same, but these two reasons are not determinative in and of themselves or together. Though Broadus wrote the following words in favor of the two sermons being identical, "There are no objections to this theory that do not admit of a probable explanation"¹², he did not deal with all the specifics presented above. In reality the biggest reason that these two sermons are viewed today as being identical that is the vast majority of harmonists have always done it this way.

There is much more discussion about this question in other circles than there is among harmonists. For only one example Walter Liefeld who contributed the commentary on Luke for the Expositors Bible Commentary wrote, "The settings of this passage and of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 are not indisputably the same, and there is considerable difference in content. Therefore many scholars call the Lukan material the 'Sermon on the Plain,' with the implication that it is, in Luke's opinion, an entirely different sermon. The probability is that there was one sermon among many that Jesus preached on similar themes that was something like a 'keynote' address."¹³

Approach this from another perspective for a moment. Which position is easier to hold? Which position has the fewer difficulties associated with it? Which position poses no unanswerable problems? Which position has the better proof arguing for it? It is easily the position that the two sermons are not only *possibly* or *probably* distinct, but that they are *clearly* distinct.

SO WHAT?

What difference does it make whichever position you hold? I would give three responses to this question (which by the way is one I am often asked).

First, if we are going to take a stand for inerrancy and infallibility of the biblical text, then turn around and dismiss discussions such as this one because of numerical support instead of specifics of content, then our stand for biblical truth is to some extent suspect.

Second, good interpretation of the text breeds good application of the text. For example, consider trying to apply the first and fourth beatitudes in Matthew

¹² Broadus, 249.

¹³ Frank E. Gabaelein, ed., *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Luke*, by Walter Liefeld (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 890.

while holding them to be identical to their corresponding beatitudes in Luke. This is a strained exercise at very best. But if you hold Matthew and Luke's beatitudes to be distinct, then their respective applications are almost self-evident.

Third, This discussion should serve as a canary in a mineshaft. Insufficient oxygen in the mine would kill the canary before the people, thus warning them of the problem. The commonly held position that these two sermons are identical, and the difficulties associated with it, is a symptom of a much broader problem with harmonies today. Harmonies, though fairly consistent in their arrangement when compared to each other, many may be repositories of perpetuated errors as one harmonist copies another's placements.

Allow me to suggest a few other harmonization issues we should revisit. (1) Is there a better way to outline Jesus' Galilean ministry? (2) *Why* did Matthew arrange chapters 8-13 differently than Mark and Luke? (3) Why are Luke 9:18-19:28 and 7:1-11:54 interwoven when there is not one verse, or even a single word, in common between them? (4) Can a case be made that the Gospels are essentially chronological in nature, and not topical? (5) Could a persuasive case be made for a two and a half year public ministry instead of a three and a half, and this without the historical error of chronologically transposing John 5 and 6?

A FINISHING QUOTE

I would like to finish with a quote from Edward Greswell, the one harmonist who gives reasons why these two sermons are distinct. It always reminds me to stay true to the Gospel narrative. "In the course of this examination, during which I had to consult some of the most popular Harmonies, I could not but observe in them such remarkable inconsistencies as were abundantly sufficient to convince my own mind that the principles, upon which they had proceeded, could not be right. The dissatisfaction produced by this discovery determined me to lay them aside, and to take the four original narratives, and nothing more, into my hands, with a view to frame out of them, for myself, a system which, if it possessed no other merit, might at least avoid such difficulties as had appeared so glaringly and so palpably in the cases alluded to."¹⁴

¹⁴ Edward Greswell, *Dissertations upon the Principles and Arrangement of an Harmony of the Gospels*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1837), I:xii.

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