

i SPY IN MY LITTLE ICON



By Kim Fritzges



We have a mosaic icon from the early 6th century of Christ and His Sermon on the Mount. In the background of the mosaic icon are brilliant, shining gold tesserae, while the rest of the icon appears to be ceramic or marble. Tesserae, which is Latin for cubes or dice, are small pieces of glass, marble, and ceramic tiles cut into squares, rectangles, and triangles to fit the pattern the iconographer is creating. Tesserae are cut using a *martelina*, a hammer with a sharp edge, and a *hardie*, similar to an anvil or *taglio*. The tesserae were laid on the hardie and struck with the *martelina* to cut off pieces in the desired shape and size. Files were also used to shape tesserae.

Byzantine mosaics differ from Roman mosaics mainly in that Roman mosaics were primarily made of marble and stone and laid flat on floors. Byzantine mosaics were mainly created on walls and ceilings, using tesserae. Many Byzantine icons have a background of glass tesserae with gold leaf between two layers of molten glass, creating a beautiful, highly reflective surface.

Another key feature of wall and ceiling Byzantine mosaics was that the tesserae were not flat like the floor mosaics; they were slightly uneven, which also helped reflect candlelight and allowed them to ‘shimmer’, giving great beauty to the mosaic icons and resembling God’s light.

The size of the tesserae can vary in a mosaic. Detailed work, such as hands, faces, and clothing ornaments, would often be

made from smaller tesserae. The material used throughout the mosaic may vary: layered glass with gold for the background, marble for clothing, and stones and ceramic tesserae for trees, shrubs, mountains, ground, and buildings. This mix of materials, especially the reflective glass and gold tesserae, would give the mosaic ‘life’ rather than making it look flat and dull.

Christ’s Sermon on the Mount is revealed to us in Matthew, chapters 5 through 7. The first part of His sermon is The Beatitudes.

“And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated, His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

**Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger
and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted
for righteousness’ sake,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Mat 5:1-10 OSB)**

The beatitudes teach us the rewards we will receive from Jesus for following them and living a life of true discipleship. He then goes on to teach on the new covenant, practicing spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and giving alms. Lastly, He teaches us that we need not be deceitful or hypocritical, but to embrace and follow a life of true righteousness.