

# The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr.

Matthew  
Mark  
Luke

Volume II:  
*From the Desert  
to the Mount*

Foreword by Phyllis Tickle, best-selling author and founding religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*



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• CHAPTER TEN •

## *From Seeming to Being: The Deeds of Righteousness Considered*

**M**eanwhile, Jesus has drawn his listeners into a new way of thinking about the law. His Great Antitheses revealed that the underlying and guiding spirit of the Mosaic code is more central to the emerging Christian community than its “jots and tittles” are. We are not only to observe the letter of the law by doing no violence to our brother; we are also to adhere to its spirit and refrain even from directing our anger toward him. We are not only to avoid retaliating against those who would harm us; we are even to love our enemies.

This is not to say that forgiveness is easy. It is still a difficult process. It requires recognition of the wrong, and moving past the hurt and resentment toward reconciliation. It can be the hardest and most indispensable thing we do.

1. Does Matthew appear to condition receipt of forgiveness from God on offering forgiveness to others? Why or why not?
2. What do you think of the way the Long commentary addresses this issue?
3. How have you experienced difficulty in offering forgiveness? In receiving it?



† *Matthew 6:16–18 On the practice of fasting*

**<sup>16</sup>And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.**

**<sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."**

1. What images does this passage offer?
2. What, if anything, does this passage mean for group fasting?

Fasting is the third deed of righteousness practiced by the Jews of Jesus' time. Historically, it was an acted-out prayer of lamentation and submission. It was often associated with mourning, atonement for sin, and national penitence. Regular occasions included Yom Kippur, the annual day of atonement when

all Jews fasted.<sup>20</sup> Widespread fasting was also practiced in times of profound national crisis.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes, voluntary fasting was practiced without reference to major occasions or holidays. This might be the practice of an individual or a small group.

Whether fasting was by an individual, a group, or the people as a whole, it was often accompanied by visual cues showing what each person was doing. Fasting took place in ashes and sackcloth. The mourning clothes drew attention to any person who might be observing the fast. It is this practice of drawing attention—looking dismal like the hypocrites who disfigured their faces to make a show of their fasting—to which Jesus objects.

As with almsgiving and prayer, Jesus directs that fasting be grounded in connection to God. It is the spirit in which the deed of righteousness is practiced, more than the act itself, that renders it either a pious practice, or a mere show.

Fasting is not to be done as the hypocrites do it, disfiguring their faces with ashes and creating a disheveled appearance. Rather, one is to anoint his head with oil and to wash his face when he fasts. These signs of celebration do not draw attention to someone's voluntary deprivation, but give a joyful radiance.

Most modern Christians have a more limited experience of fasting than they do of almsgiving and prayer, the other two deeds of righteousness. Sometimes the practice has been limited to those with religious vocations, or handed down as a mandate by church officials.

More recently, fasts are observed as voluntary community discipline, with the participants providing mutual support. The occasions leading to these fasts might be solemn days or events, such as on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday. Or they might be times when the observers want to identify themselves with a group in need, such as the poor or homeless. The point then is to draw attention to those in need, not to those who fast.

1. Have you ever fasted? Was it individually or as part of a group? What was the experience like?

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<sup>20</sup>Boring at 205 (citing Leviticus 16).

<sup>21</sup>Long at 72 (citing 2 Chronicles 1–4).

2. Have you been tempted to let your fasting practice be publicly known? What did you do with that temptation?
3. How does allowing attention to be drawn to your almsgiving or prayer compare to allowing it to be drawn to your fast?



In this chapter, Matthew's Jesus reaffirms the importance of practicing piety in the three deeds of righteousness that first-century Jews traditionally observed. With exhortation to almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, he continues to let the Great Sermon unfold as an observant Jew would. But he also radicalizes it. It is not proper simply to go through the motions or to put on a pious show. One must embrace the deeds of righteousness as a way of serving God.

And that is the point of true piety: to *be* observant, rather than merely to *seem* observant. Jesus expects God to bless those who faithfully observe important devotional practices of their faith. But this reward is not transactional; it is relational. It is experienced in living the will of God as a member of the community of the faithful.

Where can this teaching lead us?

