

# The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

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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*



R. BRENT AND COMPANY  
Asheville, North Carolina  
rbrent.com

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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.

3. Jesus uses humorous imagery of pomp and circumstance announcing someone's separation from his loose change. How often do you take what Jesus says as humor? When is it appropriate to do so? How can we know?
4. How do you reconcile private action and public awareness in your own life? How do you remove the bushel basket so that your light can shine, without sounding a trumpet call in the process?



† *Matthew 6:5–8 On the practice of prayer*

**<sup>5</sup>“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.**

**<sup>6</sup>“But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

**<sup>7</sup>“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.**

**<sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”**

1. What images does this passage offer?
2. Have you been tempted to let your prayer practice be publicly known? What did you do with that temptation?
3. How do you compare your prayer life to the prayer life that Jesus describes?
4. What, if anything, does this passage mean for group prayer?

The contrasts in this passage might be summarized as “how *not* to pray” versus “how *to* pray.”

Jesus first speaks against prayer for show. The word “hypocrite” appears again. The public prayers that Jesus criticizes are those spoken in synagogues and on street corners. Hypocrites who offer prayers in public “so that they may be seen by others” receive their reward in the admiration of the onlookers. Nothing passes between the actor and God, only between the actor and his audience.

The other negative comparison is to babbling Gentiles. Jesus’ comment is religio-cultural rather than ethnic. There were countless Greco-Roman deities in the pantheon. A supplicant might call out as many divine names as possible, embroidering words of flattery about each and hoping to curry the right god’s favor so that his prayer may be answered.

We see examples of gentile prayers in Homeric literature. In the *Iliad*, warrior-heroes call out the names of different deities in times of distress. They offer praise and sacrifice in exchange for deliverance. Similarly, the blessings of the gods are sought throughout the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, favored by Athena, frequently calls upon her for aid.

Even as we move out of the mythical, heroic past and into the era of history, we still see examples of Greeks approaching their gods through ritual and superstition. The Athenians stood alone at Marathon to repel the Persian invasion by King Darius because the Spartans were occupied with observing important religious rituals and were forbidden to travel to their aid. The high demands of religious ritual kept them from participation even in the defense of the Greek homeland against invasion by the mightiest empire in the world.

In Roman culture, long journeys were undertaken only after offering temple sacrifices to appease the gods. The traveler would seek a blessing on his journey. Mistakes in religious rituals required that the whole process be started over from the beginning. There could be no movement to the next step until everything before had been correctly completed.

This focus on ritual persisted at the highest level. Julius Caesar excelled at priestly offices and was appointed Roman high priest for life. It became a means to build power and prestige. His adopted son, the emperor Augustus, consulted astrological signs before making important decisions.

Much of Greco-Roman life revolved around observing superstitious rituals, making the right petition to the right god in the right way, and heaping up

“empty phrases” in hopes that these exhaustive religious efforts—and a little good luck—would please the gods. The practice of pagan piety had become neurotic.

Some of these same characteristics afflicted even the monotheistic Jews. Rather than focusing on simple prayers to Yahweh, observant Jews sometimes followed a heavily ritualized practice, searching for just the right words to address the divine power. Prayers were scheduled for certain times of day. They involved repetition of words and phrases. According to Barclay, there was one prayer that attached sixteen different adjectives to the name of God.<sup>3</sup> Some adherents to Judaism, like their pagan counterparts, were floundering in a sea of words. Religious observance was bogged down in superstition and formalism.

It is against the background of these rituals in both the Judaic and Gentile worlds that we must measure the words of Matthew’s Jesus. He asks his followers to pursue prayer differently. They are not to make a show, seeking to be the best pray-ers in the street or at the synagogue. They are to go into their own rooms and pray secretly to God. No babbling; no show; no superstition; no repetition. Instead, they are to seek a quiet encounter with God, who already knows what they need. It is time for a conversation, not an incantation. Simplicity is in order. Isn’t that a relieving antidote to the frenzies that had become the norm? Isn’t this authentic encounter with God in itself a type of reward for the secret worshiper?

While this direction from Jesus should be a relief to Christians, we do not always treat it that way. Formalism still creeps into our lives. The *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer* contains many beautiful and eloquent prayers, often associated with particular holidays or occasions. Used properly, they are openings to communion with God. They reorient us and provide a way to connect with the divine presence. But when used as a crutch, these prayers become a new formalism. We speak the familiar words, or sing the familiar hymns, without proper focus. We can fall easily into the sort of inauthentic religious practices that many of the people of Jesus’ day did.

Christians also face other temptations in the practice of prayer. Sometimes prayer-as-show reappears, complete with ridiculous posturing. Several years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court rendered an opinion that the organized recitation of the Lord’s Prayer at public high school football games ran afoul of the

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<sup>3</sup>Barclay commentary on Matthew at 196–197.

Establishment Clause of the Constitution. The Court's decision hardly broke new ground; instead, it extended an existing line of church-state jurisprudence about prayer in public school to voluntary, though organized, school-sponsored activities, such as football games.

The Court's decision should not have been much of a surprise, but people can always find ways to get worked up about their pet peeves. Where I live, in Asheville, North Carolina, red bumper stickers proclaiming "WE STILL PRAY!" appeared. An organization bearing the same name sponsored the stickers and encouraged fans at high-school football games to "spontaneously" say the Lord's Prayer in unison before the games started.

A letter to the editor of the *Asheville Citizen-Times* criticized the WE STILL PRAY! movement by citing Matthew 6:5–8. The writer pointed out that Jesus had advised praying to God privately rather than on the street corners—or in the bleachers, for that matter!—to show one's piety.

Rather than accepting and learning from the letter's reproof, a WE STILL PRAY! partisan jumped to the defense of the movement. A new letter to the editor appeared, referring to another biblical text about "not being ashamed" to proclaim the name of the Lord. The biblical passage the second writer cited addressed how the believer should explain the Gospel to the authorities, rather than disown Jesus, when placed under arrest for his faith. Of course, that biblical text had nothing to do with how one behaved at a voluntary recreational activity. But the writer cited it anyway and argued *against* the very kind of prayer that Matthew's Jesus encouraged, and *for* the very kind of prayer that Matthew's Jesus prohibited.

Whether we are "sophisticated" Episcopalians with our Prayer Book, or Bible-thumpers from the WE STILL PRAY! crowd, we sometimes don't follow Jesus' guidance very well. We let the recitation of prayers fall into formalism. We let public prayers become an occasion to show off how faithful we are.

We are hypocrites and formalists in need of Jesus' guidance, often failing to heed it.

1. The commentary is critical of superstition, formalism, and public prayer that is intended to draw attention. It offers examples of each. Do you agree with the examples? Why or why not? Which examples would you choose?



2. The commentary suggests that private prayer with the God who knows our needs contains a reward in itself. Do you agree with this assessment? What other rewards do you see in private prayer? Are worldly rewards a proper part of the equation? Why or why not?
3. Group prayer is a common feature in Sunday morning worship services. Does this passage speak to that practice? If so, how?
4. Sometimes a family might say a quiet grace over a meal at a restaurant. Do you believe this practice falls within the behaviors Jesus is criticizing? Why or why not?



Matthew 6:5–8 speaks clearly about some aspects of prayer. We are told where and where not to pray. We are also told how and how not to pray. But we are told little about the contents of our prayers, or about when (if ever) group or public prayer is proper. We turn our attention to these topics in the following passage.

† *Matthew 6:9–15 The Lord's Prayer*

<sup>9</sup>Pray then in this way:

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

<sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup>Give us this day our daily bread.

<sup>12</sup>And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup>And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.'

<sup>14</sup>For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup>but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.'