

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*



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

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: A JOURNEY INTO THE KINGDOM: VOLUME II: FROM THE DESERT TO THE MOUNT. Copyright © 2006–2008 by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr. and The Synoptic Project, Ltd. All rights reserved. Electronic access to these pages does not waive copyright in them. A user may print selected pages for personal use only, without commercial use or distribution. For information, contact Edward L. Bleynat Jr., 21 Broad Street, Asheville, NC 28801.

10

• CHAPTER TEN •

From Seeming to Being: The Deeds of Righteousness Considered

Meanwhile, 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.

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*

⁹Pray then in this way:

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

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

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

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

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

1. How does the NRSV's translation of the Lord's Prayer, above, differ from the King James Version, which is more familiar and more frequently recited aloud?
2. What is missing from the NRSV?
3. What is included in the NRSV that is not traditionally recited with the Lord's Prayer?
4. Which version do you prefer? Why?
5. When something is very familiar and well-loved, a little variation can distract us. Does raising questions about the NRSV's variations help clear the way for a deeper understanding? Were you even distracted by those variations to begin with? How do you overcome distractions and engage in a more thorough study of scripture?

In the previous segment, Matthew's Jesus addressed prayer generally as one of the deeds of righteousness. Now, he moves away from general statements about prayer to specific ways in which it is to be done: "Pray then in this way."

But before we explore the meaning of each segment of the text, we will look at sources for the passage and its overall structure. Different versions of the Lord's Prayer appear in Matthew and Luke, but none appears in Mark. Therefore, it is likely that the prayer comes from the lost Q source.

Luke and Matthew Compared

Our working premise in this series is that Luke generally tracks Q more closely than Matthew does. So, we will briefly consider Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer as being closer to the source before seeing what Matthew has done with it. We will also explore why Matthew might have made the changes he has made.

Here is Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer from chapter 11 of his gospel:

²He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Luke's version is shorter, less lyrical, and less expository than Matthew's. For example, Luke and Matthew both have the petition "Your kingdom come." Only Matthew follows it with "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Matthew's revision reflects a common Jewish literary practice. When one important statement is made, another statement often closely follows to amplify the meaning of the first. Barclay cites a number of examples that conform to this pattern.⁴ A familiar one is from the twenty-third psalm:

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters.

Verse 2 illustrates verse 1. The sheep are not left wanting. Why? Because the shepherd makes them lie down in green pastures by still waters. Pastoral imagery displays the care God gives to his beloved little ones.

The Lord's Prayer also contains another example. In Matthew's version, the prayer to avoid the time of trial includes a prayer for deliverance from the evil one. Matthew's second statement contains an exposition on the meaning of the first. We avoid the time of trial in being delivered from the evil one.

⁴Barclay commentary on Matthew at 211.

Matthew uses traditional Jewish literary practice to expand on the Q source for the prayer.⁵

1. The commentary suggests that Matthew contains a more literary and lyrical adaptation of Q than Luke does. Do you agree? Do you think instead that they might be similar prayers offered on different occasions? What are your reasons?
2. We have looked briefly at examples of a statement in one verse receiving amplification or exposition in the next. How helpful is this literary technique to you? Can you think of other examples where it occurs?

The Structure and Content of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew

Having examined the probable source of Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, we can now look at the prayer itself. We will first consider its tightly woven literary structure and, from there, explore its contents.

Both structure and content speak to core human wants and anxieties, calling us to recognize our deep need for connection to God. The Lord's Prayer provides a model of how to make that connection in whatever circumstances confront us. We can supplement it with our own thanksgivings or petitions. Often, our own momentary needs and petitions are best placed in perspective when joined with the timelessness of the Lord's Prayer.

In studying the Lord's Prayer, we will indulge ourselves by using the King James Version of the Bible. It is the best known and offers us some familiar ground from which to begin our review. And, as Prof. Joseph D. Cushman of the history department at The University of the South once said in his erudite drawl to my wife's awe-stricken freshman class, "You know, there is something sacred in beauty, too." His comment was about the King James Version.

⁵We should not view Matthew's expository phrase as either correcting a deficiency or clarifying an ambiguity in Q or Luke. Luke's version merits its own independent study, which we will conduct in a future volume. Matthew is simply extrapolating on the meaning of the text, using a technique that would have been familiar to his Jewish Christian audience.