

Matt. 6:7 “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. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

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

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

Matt. 6:16 “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. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸
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.

Matt. 6:19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

My daughter recently gave me a book which she had used at Malone University. The title of the book is interesting, as it says “**What Christians Ought to Believe.**” Some people might be offended by that title, or that concept. Maybe they were offended by the words of our prayer this morning, which actually come from a Canadian Anglican prayer book. We prayed “*Author and Giver of all good things, graft in our hearts the love of your name, increase in us true religion, nourish us in all goodness, and of your great mercy keep us in the the same.*” Increase in us **true religion**. I actually totally approve of that part of the prayer. We should have good discussions of concepts like this.

Like the title of the book, I do believe that there are things that Christians ought to believe. Probably in the last 10 years I have come to describe myself religiously as very shaped by the Apostles Creed, and by the Lord's Prayer. Those two things are absolutely at the heart of what I truly believe. For me they are essential in what I would consider to be *true religion*. But this is a problem. Why? Well, many Protestant churches in America, probably 1/2 of these churches never say the Lord's Prayer, and they would absolutely never say the Apostles Creed. I find that powerfully disappointing. If churches do not want any part of these historic centers of our faith, then what will they use to replace these things? Many have moved to social and political concerns, especially since the late 1970's. Let me try to get us back on track here.

A brilliant scholar and church leader, Bishop NT Wright, Bishop of the Church of England and the #1 NT scholar in the world today, who I love and had the chance to meet and learn from back in 2012 in Chicago, Bishop Wright had a new book published in 2015 called **SIMPLY GOOD NEWS**. It is a book about what he would call true religion. It happens to be my #1 recommended book to all people, if they were to read a book about the heart of Christianity. I recommend it right now, and have in the last 5 years. It is not a big book, but towards the end Bishop Wright talks directly about the Lord's Prayer. He makes the claim that it is essential for us as Christians, and that it should get inside us and change who we are. I agree 100% with Bishop Wright.

Well, just like with everything else in life, there are complications. We have 3 problems with this, at least. First, we are trying to read a prayer that we usually know only in 409-year old

English, that reminds us more of Shakespeare than modern America. That is an issue. Second, we have used the Lord's Prayer in America in an odd way that other people do not do. I remember hearing from football players in high school that just before they would come out on the field, the coach would have them kneel and recite this together. Now, at first look, that sounds admirable. But are they using it as some kind of prayer for safety, or as some kind of an insurance thing, or a good luck thing? Even though I like the idea of people praying, this prayer would not seem to match the situation at hand. You tell me, are football players from public high schools going to pray a prayer that begins asking for the sanctification of God's Name, and the coming of God's Kingdom to this earth? This is what comes first. And then it speaks about daily bread, or bread for tomorrow, and then forgiveness, and forgiving others, and then protection from evil. All of those are great things for a prayer, but they don't seem to fit going to play football and potentially clocking some other guy!

I mention this as a complication because for many people, the Lord's Prayer is something that you recite *without knowing what you are reciting*, as you get ready to play a football game. I am not knocking the coaches who would do this. But what does it do to something to recite a prayer that is not understood in the deep way that it deserves? This is the third complication here: The Lord's Prayer is truly great, it is at the heart of true religion as far as I am concerned. It deserves to be understood. But it seems not to be understood much at all.

Bishop Wright actually explains that for many modern Christians, there could be a different prayer that better represents

what is central for them. We have a slide here to see this alternate prayer. Based on what modern Christians say about their faith, Tom Wright offers this other prayer:

“O God, please forgive me my sins and take me to heaven forever (and by the way, help me to stop sinning now). O God, thank you for showing me how to live. Please help me to do it. O God, please give me enough food so that I can at least feed my family. O God, please bring justice to your world, which needs it so badly. O God, please heal Annie, Ben, Caroline, David, Eleanor and Frank (and right on through the alphabet).” AMEN.

Are these terrible things to lift up in prayer? No. But here is a quick little point to grasp: How many of these pieces are all about personal requests? Only 1 part is not about me or mine. BTW, count how many times this uses the word ME. Including the word MY, we have 8 times. How many times does the actual Lord's Prayer use the word me, I, my, or mine? The answer is zero. So it would seem that the real Lord's Prayer is not about ME. It is not self-oriented. And this is the actual one that Jesus taught and gave us. His prayer is 100% Jewish, as these are all things in the prayers of his day. He has them concentrated here. But this prayer is never about me. It is always about all of us. I can guarantee us that Jesus is not going to teach or encourage a self-centered prayer. So what does he teach us?

I have mentioned before a day my life changed in the spring of 1984. I had been studying NT Greek and was in my 3rd quarter course of Greek. I was starting to be able to do it pretty well. I was

sitting in our library at seminary, and I started reading my little Greek NT, and I was in Matthew 6. It was truly one of the most special days of my life. I had been reciting the Lord's Prayer since I was a kid in church. I didn't really know what I was saying. We didn't normally use words like Hallowed, or thy, or trespasses! We are Americans, so we do not talk about Kingdoms, as we have no king. I would lead the Lord's Prayer every Sunday as a student pastor, but it was still the same feeling as it had always been. And then came that afternoon! I started reading the prayer in the original language, and I thought "WAIT A MINUTE! THERE MUST BE A MISTAKE! THIS IS SOMETHING ELSE!" It was like it went from being a black and white silent movie to being full color with surround sound! **Cause your name to be most holy! Cause your Kingdom to come! Cause your Will to be done, on earth as it already is done where you are!** This is true religion! The question is not what is going to happen to me, as if my life is the ultimate important thing in the universe. The question is, will God's name be revered, and most revered at that? Will God's Kingdom come to this world? Yes, or no? Jesus is asking us to pray for the coming of this Kingdom. He is asking us to pray for the ultimate redemption and healing of the world (and it really needs it!) . And then we make our way down the list. Next we ask for the bread of tomorrow to come today, the Bread of Tomorrow being the bread at the Banquet in this new Kingdom. And then we get to forgiveness, asking it for ourselves, but then being told that it is contingent upon us forgiving those who have wronged us. And then we pray for protection from evil, and to not give in to temptations.

Bishop Wright explains in his book that our normal prayers are as if we had gone to see God, and we went in, but we went in the wrong door. We are wandering around in other places. When our prayers are filled with our own requests, our own concerns, prayers for only the people we know, prayers especially for the health of others, if we are doing this, we are starting from the wrong end of the Lord's Prayer. We are starting at the end, which lifts up our own personal concerns. The big part of the prayer starts with concerns about God and God's redemption of all that is broken. That is something that is worthy of our prayer time! As Bishop Wright has in this book, *“Up to this point, working back through the prayer, we have focussed on our own needs. Now we look up and see a larger plan. It's time for God to become King- here and now. Now at last we come into the entrance hall and glimpse our host for the first time.”*

Jesus wants us to get to God the correct way. But usually we are mainly concerned about what we want, and not what God wants. Increase in us true religion.

Yes, this prayer needs to be in us, it needs to be a big part of our understanding. The prayer is not about us, it is about God, and it is about God's Kingdom, where God's name will be most holy. St. Paul warns us in Romans 2 that God's name is blasphemed and cursed among the Nations because we do not live as we should, because we are not the people we should be. Will others bless the name of God because of how we live and conduct our lives?

Let this prayer get into us. It is from Jesus, pointing to God. Will it become real in us? AMEN.