

## Classics

### Two Intriguing Questions About Prayer

#### Why should we pray to a God who knows all things? Is it right to pray for material things?

By Thomas Aquinas

**Is it appropriate to pray?** On the face of it, it is not appropriate to pray:

1. Prayer seems to be needed to give information about what we want to the person we are asking for something. But, as [Scripture] says, “Your Father knows that you need all these things” [Matthew. 6:32]. So it [appears to be] not appropriate to pray to God.

2. Prayer is a way in which we change the mind of the person to whom we are praying, so that he will do what is being asked of him. But God’s mind cannot be changed or deflected. “Furthermore” [the Scripture says], “He who triumphs in Israel will not spare, nor will He be deflected by any repentance” [1 Samuel 15:29]. So it looks as if it is not appropriate to pray to God.

3. It is more generous to give something without waiting to be asked than it is to give something to someone who asks for it. . . . But God is extremely generous. So it is apparently not appropriate that we should pray to God.

On the other hand [the Scripture says], “One should pray always and not give up” [Luke 18:1].

#### Reply

. . . We can shed some light on the problem by bearing in mind that divine providence does not merely arrange what effects are to occur; it also arranges the causes of these effects and the relationships between them. And among other causes, some things are caused by human acts.

So human beings have to do certain things, not so as to change God’s plan by their acts, but in order to bring about certain effects by their acts, according to the pattern planned by God. . . . Similarly, in the case of prayer we do not pray in order to change God’s plan, but in order to obtain by our prayers those things which God planned to bring about by means of prayers, in order . . . that our prayers should entitle us to receive what almighty God planned from all eternity to give us.

In reply to the points raised above:

1. We do not have to present our prayers to God in order to disclose to Him our needs and desires, but in order to make ourselves realize that we need to have recourse to His help in these matters.

2. Our prayer is not designed to change God’s plan; the purpose of prayer is to obtain . . . what God has already planned.

3. God gives us many things out of sheer generosity, without being asked. The reason why He wants to give us some things in response to our petition is that it is profitable for us to acquire . . . confidence in running to Him and to recognize that He is the source of all that is good for us.

**Should we ask God for temporal things in prayer?** It seems that we should not ask God

for temporal things in prayer:

1. What we ask for in prayer we are seeking, and we are not meant to seek temporal things: [The Scripture] says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness and all these things (temporal things, that is) will be added to you” [Matthew 6:33]. They are not to be sought, it says; they are to be added to what is sought.

2. People only ask for things when they are concerned about them. But we are not meant to have any concern about temporal things. As [the Scripture] says, “Do not be concerned about your life, about what you are going to eat” [Matthew 6:25]. . . .

3. Our minds should be raised to God by our prayers, but if we ask for temporal things they descend to matters that are beneath them. . . .

On the other hand, [the Scripture] says, “Give me just the necessities of life” [Proverbs 30:8].

### **Reply**

As Augustine says, it is lawful to pray for what it is lawful to desire. And it is lawful to desire temporal things, not as an end in themselves or as our primary object, but as supports which help us on our way toward [final blessedness in God], inasmuch as they serve to sustain our bodily life and play an instrumental role in our virtuous deeds. . . .

In reply to the points raised above:

1. Temporal things are to be sought, not as our primary object, but in second place. So Augustine says, “In saying that the former (the Kingdom of God) should be sought first, [Christ] indicated that the latter (temporal goods) should be sought afterward. . . . The former is sought as a good [in itself], the latter only as something we need.”

2. What is forbidden is not . . . any concern [at all] about temporal things, but an exaggerated, [inordinate] concern for them. . . .

3. When our mind turns to temporal things in order to rest in them [as our final goal], then it does remain weighed down with them. But when it turns to them with a view to attaining [final blessedness in God], far from being weighed down by them it rather raises them up.

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THOMAS AQUINAS (c. 1225–1274) was the greatest theologian of the Middle Ages. His synthesis of faith and reason has influenced Christian thinking down to the present. In his chief theological work, the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas typically poses a question concerning a specific debated issue, states the arguments against his own position, then responds to them point by point. This excerpt comes from the section of the “*Summa*” on prayer.