

Divine goodness and the efficacy of petitionary prayer

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Abstract: Is divine goodness incompatible with efficacious petitionary prayer? Scott Davison has recently argued that prayer cannot make a difference in what God would do since a good God must always do what is best. I examine Davison's presentation of the divine goodness problem for petitionary prayer, and argue that the argument fails. I go on to argue that, since there are certain relational benefits uniquely made available through responding to petitionary prayer, divine goodness leads us to expect that God would at least sometimes respond to petitionary prayer – even prayers for third parties.

Theistic religious practices typically include praying to God for the satisfaction of needs and desires, both for oneself and for others. Some find this practice of petitionary prayer puzzling, given a theology that maintains that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good. In his commentary *On the Sermon on the Mount*, Augustine of Hippo asks, 'What need there is for prayer itself, if God already knows what is necessary for us (Augustine (1888), bk 2, ch. 3)?' This puzzle arises from an apparent tension between God's omniscience and the practice of prayer: why tell God anything at all if God already knows everything? Augustine's response is typical of Christian thinkers throughout history: because prayer is good for us. He says:

[T]he very effort involved in prayer calms and purifies our heart, and makes it more capacious for receiving the divine gifts, which are poured into us spiritually. . . . Hence there is brought about in prayer a turning of the heart to Him, who is ever ready to give, if we will but take what He has given; and in the very act of turning there is effected a purging of the inner eye, inasmuch as those things of a temporal kind which were desired are excluded, so that the vision of the pure heart may be able to bear the pure light, divinely shining, without any setting or change: and not only to bear it, but also to remain in it; not merely without annoyance, but also with ineffable joy, in which a life truly and sincerely blessed is perfected. (*ibid.*)

Augustine suggests that the practice of prayer itself, since it involves focusing attention on God, makes us more capable of receiving certain good things God wants to give us, most importantly a perfected life of remaining in and enjoying God's presence. So this is one sense of 'efficacious prayer': that prayer does have an effect, but that effect is primarily an immediate psychological effect on the one who prays brought about by act of praying itself.¹

Recent philosophical discussions regarding prayer, however, have shifted to a focus on God's perfect goodness. I know of no contemporary believers or sceptics arguing that prayer is efficacious only if God doesn't already know what our needs or desires are; rather, the sceptical thesis is that prayer is efficacious only if *God isn't already sufficiently motivated by his goodness* to provide what we would ask for *without our asking*. This is what Scott Davison calls 'the divine goodness problem' of prayer (Davison (2009), 292). Davison and others take the divine goodness problem to imply that prayer is not efficacious in the sense commonly assumed in religious practice: they deny that prayer can make a difference in what God does.

My purpose is to show that divine goodness does not present a problem for the practice of prayer, but rather should lead practitioners to expect that prayer is efficacious. I will begin by critiquing Davison's account of answer prayer, and offering a revised account in order to advance our understanding of the sort of efficacy at issue. I will then reconstruct the argument from divine goodness against the efficacy of prayer, and argue that the argument fails for two reasons: first, because we have good reason to doubt certain crucial premises, and second, because it involves an invalid inference. I then present a positive reason for believing that a perfectly good God would respond to petitionary prayer. Like Augustine, I will argue that there are relational benefits to be gained through prayer; however, I will argue that God responding to prayer by providing what is requested can uniquely provide certain relational benefits. Furthermore, this argument will explain why prayer for third parties can also be efficacious.

The relevant sense of 'efficacious prayer'

Prayer is efficacious if it is the case that prayers are at least sometimes answered. So what is it for prayer to be answered? In this section I will explain Davison's account of answered prayer, and revise the account in order to express more precisely the sense of 'efficacious' at issue. Here is Davison's 'reasons account of answered prayer':

- (RA) A person's prayer for something is answered by God if and only if (1) the person prays for the thing in question, (2) the thing in question is good, (3) God brings about the thing in question, and (4) God brings about the thing in question at least in part because the person prays for it. (*ibid.*, 288)

Conditions (1) and (3) seem fine, as long as (3) is not taken to imply that God must not involve any other agents in bringing about what is requested. Condition (2) is unnecessary, because intuitively, if all the other conditions were met, we would have a case of answered prayer. We might think that if what was requested wasn't good, then God wouldn't bring it about; but that is a condition on when a prayer might or might not be answered, and not part of what it means for a prayer to be answered.

Condition (4) requires some clarification. What does it mean that God brings something about 'because' someone prays for it? Davison argues that 'because' cannot imply that prayer compels God, since God's actions are free. An omniscient and omniscient God would make decisions that are informed by a perfect grasp of all relevant facts (*ibid.*, 290). The fact that a petitioner prays for a certain state of affairs to obtain is relevant to God's decision whether or not to bring about that state of affairs, and so would be among God's reasons in favour of bringing about that state of affairs. Therefore (4) is better expressed as:

(4*) God's reasons for bringing about the thing in question include that the person prayed for it.

If 'include' implies that all that is needed is that the prayer is in God's set of reasons, then condition (4*) will be met for all states of affairs which are both actualized by God and for which someone prayed.² But it could be the case that for any state of affairs, God's non-prayer-reasons always overwhelm God's prayer-reasons to actualize or refrain from actualizing that state of affairs. If this is the case then it seems that prayers are not efficacious, since prayers would in fact make no difference in God's decisions. So it seems that 'include' must be stronger than simply meaning that prayers number among God's reasons; however, it must not be so strong as to imply that prayers must be God's only reasons.³

Davison, though sensitive to such concerns, offers no clarifying solution (*ibid.*).⁴ However, in his presentation of the divine goodness problem, he indicates at least a partial answer:

But if God would have brought about the good things for which people prayed anyway, even if prayers had not been offered, then it follows from the reasons account that God's actions do not count as answers to those prayers, since the offering of the prayers cannot have played a significant enough role in God's decision. (*ibid.*, 292)

This claim is problematic. It does not follow from the reasons account that nothing God would have brought about without prayer can be an answer to prayer, since the reasons account was too vague; it could be interpreted such that all states of affairs both actualized by God and requested in prayer count as answers to prayer. We need more precision regarding how significant the prayer-reasons need to be relative to God's decision to actualize the requested state of affairs, and it seems as if Davison is providing us with that added level of precision

here: the prayer-reasons must be significant enough that if those prayers had not been offered, then God would not have actualized the requested state of affairs. So now clause (4) of the reasons account should be read as follows:

(4**) (a) God's reasons for bringing about the thing in question include that the person prayed for it, and (b) if God had no prayer-reasons for bringing it about, then God would not have brought about the thing in question.

One might object that even (4**) is too weak, since it might be the case that if this person's prayer were God's only prayer-reason, God would not have brought about the thing in question. In that case it still seems like God hasn't answered that prayer, even if the prayer was among God's reasons. But this objection must be balanced by noting that it could also be the case that God brings something about just because some group of people prays for it. In such a case each one in the group had his or her prayer answered, even if it were true that God would not have answered only one group member's prayer for that thing without the prayers of the others. These considerations can be accommodated by adding a third clause to (4**), as follows:

(4***) (a) God's reasons for bringing about the thing in question include that the person prayed for it, and (b) if God had no prayer-reasons for bringing it about, then God would not have brought about the thing in question, and (c) it is not the case that if this prayer-reason, or the group-prayer-reason to which this prayer belongs, were God's only prayer-reason, then God would not have brought about the thing in question.

Now reassembling the reasons account with these revisions (and dropping what had been clause (2) such that (4***) becomes clause (3)) gives us what I will call the 'revised reasons account of answered prayer' (hereafter 'RRA'):

(RRA) A person's prayer for something is answered by God if and only if (1) the person prays for the thing in question, (2) God brings about the thing in question, and (3) (a) God's reasons for bringing about the thing in question include that the person prayed for it, and (b) if God had no prayer-reasons for bringing it about, then God would not have brought about the thing in question, and (c) it is not the case that if this prayer-reason, or the group-prayer-reason to which this prayer belongs, were God's only prayer-reason, then God would not have brought about the thing in question.⁵

If such conditions are ever met, then it is true that God at least sometimes responds to prayer, and if God sometimes responds to a prayer in the way described, then that prayer is efficacious. So the relevant sense of 'efficacious' in general is that the conditions of (RRA) are at least sometimes met. The more frequently these conditions are satisfied, the more efficacious the practice of petitionary prayer is. With this understanding of 'efficacious prayer' in mind, we are now in a better position to approach the divine goodness problem of petitionary prayer.

The divine goodness problem of petitionary prayer

Davison gives the following intuitive statement of the divine goodness problem:⁶

Some traditional theists have held the view that God must always do what is best. . . . If this were so, then of course God [must]⁷ do anything for which anyone prays if such prayers happen to specify the maximum value available in a given situation. But in nearly all these cases, God [must] bring about those same states of affairs even if nobody prays for them, which implies that God's bringing about those states of affairs would not qualify as answers to prayers, since the offering of the prayer would not play an important enough role among God's reasons for bringing them about . . . (*ibid.*, 292)

Below is a formal argument based on Davison's statement, supplemented where necessary to clarify the logical form. It begins with an assumption based on divine goodness:

1. A perfectly good God must always do what is best in every situation.

From (1), we can infer both of the following, though Davison does not explicitly state (3):

2. For any particular situation, God will bring about whatever state of affairs is the best possible in that situation.
3. For any particular situation, God will not bring about any state of affairs that is not the best in that situation.

From (2) we can infer:

4. If a prayer is for a state of affairs which is the best possible in a particular situation, then God would have brought about that state of affairs without that prayer.

From (4) and (RRA: 3b) we can infer:

5. Prayers for a state of affairs which is the best possible in a given situation are not efficacious.

From (3) we can infer:

6. If a prayer is for a state of affairs that is not the best possible in a particular situation, then God will not bring about that state of affairs even with that prayer.

From (6) and (RRA: 3c) we can infer:

7. Prayers for a state of affairs that is not the best possible in a given situation are not efficacious.

Before we can get Davison's conclusion, we need the following additional assumption:

8. Every prayer is for a state of affairs that is either the best possible in a particular situation, or is not the best possible in that situation.

From (5), (7), and (8) we can infer Davison's conclusion:

9. No prayers are efficacious.

Notice that the conclusion is universal: it is not that prayers are often not efficacious, or that the practice of prayer generally is only weakly efficacious, but that prayer is never efficacious; that is, the conclusion is that the conditions of (RRA) are never met.

I believe that this argument is subject to a two significant objections. First, premise (1) is dubious, since there may not be one 'best' that God must do in at least some situations. Second, the inferences from (2) to (4) and from (3) to (6) are also dubious, since a state of affairs having been brought about by God in response to prayer can affect the goodness of that state of affairs. If these objections are successful, then both the soundness and the validity of the above argument are dubious at best. In the next two sections I will explain these objections. In the final section, I will build on the central idea of the second objection to arguing that we have reason to think that God's answering petitionary prayers can uniquely contribute to the goodness of divine-human relationships.

Is there just one best in every situation?

If there is no best in some situations, then it is false that God must do what is best in every situation. Why think that there may not be one best in some situations? Though Davison uses the terms 'situation' and 'state of affairs' distinctly in his argument, it seems obvious that a 'situation' is a state of affairs. The most plausible way to understand the difference is to think of a 'situation' as a current (to the petitioner) state of affairs to which a petitioner is attending, and to think of 'state of affairs' as another state of affairs which (it seems to the petitioner) could be 'annexed' to that situation in order to change the outcome or final state of the situation to one which (it seems to the petitioner) is better than some alternative outcome. The interests of those involved set the boundaries of 'situations' and 'states of affairs'. If God is the omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good creator of all that is, then it seems that the 'situation' with which God is concerned is the world as a whole – past, present, and future. Let's call this 'the Big Picture'; to use contemporary philosophical parlance, it is a possible world consisting of the actual world up to the time of the request and the various possible futures from the time of the request. If we suppose, as Davison does, that what makes the actualization of some state of affairs the 'best' thing to do in a particular

situation is a matter of that state of affairs adding the most value to a situation, then, from the divine perspective, all states of affairs are to be judged by what value they add to the Big Picture, and the ‘calculation’ of the value of a particular state of affairs will have to take into account not only whatever value might be intrinsic to the state of affairs under consideration, but also how that state of affairs fits into the Big Picture. Only God is in a position to make such judgements, since only God can ‘see’ the Big Picture.

If there is only one best outcome in every situation, then there is one unique best possible world, and God must actualize that world. But if there are a variety of equally good possible worlds, and if the difference between one possible world and another is just the difference between the states of affairs of which they are composed, then it seems that God would not be bound to do what is ‘best’ in every situation. If there is no one ‘best’ Big Picture, then premise (1) fails and the argument along with it. I see no reason to think that there is just one ‘best’ Big Picture available to God, and also no reason to think that we could know that there was even if there was. Therefore we have good reason to doubt premise (1).⁸

The goodness of a situation can be affected by prayer

But suppose that there is one best possible world, or that, even if there isn’t one best possible world, it is still the case that every situation about which someone prays is such that there is one best outcome. Could we then infer that God would do what is best without it being requested (i.e. premise 4), and that God would not do what is not best even if requested (i.e. premise 6)? No, we cannot, since a state of affair’s being requested can affect the goodness of the obtaining of that state of affairs. Therefore, the inference from ‘S requests X, and X is the best in this situation’ to ‘God would have brought about X without X being requested’ is invalid.⁹

Why? Possibly, in some situations, the obtaining of state of affairs X would be best if X is requested, but the obtaining of X would not be best if X is not requested. For example, suppose it’s true that God can only forgive our sins if we ask for forgiveness.¹⁰ Donald Trump has famously said that he doesn’t think he has ever asked God for forgiveness.¹¹ Let’s assume that in the situation that is Trump’s life it is best for Trump to be forgiven for his sins. If God cannot forgive those who do not request forgiveness, however, then it is false that God would forgive Trump’s sins (i.e. bring about what is best in the situation) without being asked to do so.¹² Consider also the biblical cases of Elijah’s request that God rain fire from heaven upon the sacrifice that he had prepared (1 Kings 18), and of King Hezekiah’s request for healing (2 Kings 20). In the case of Elijah’s request, the rain of fire would not have had the significance that it did have to those who witnessed it had it not been a response to a prayer, and so the value or goodness of the rain of fire would not have been the same. In the case of Hezekiah’s prayer, it seems that Hezekiah’s living fifteen years more was only best because he

passionately requested a longer life. God granted the request apparently in affirmation of Hezekiah's faithfulness during his reign as king, and it seems that the fact that the extension of Hezekiah's life was in response to a request from Hezekiah was essential to the goodness of Hezekiah's extra years. In other words, what made it the case that Hezekiah's recovering was better than his dying at that time is that his recovering would be an answer to a request made by a righteous king whom God wished to honour. Therefore we cannot assume that God would have extended Hezekiah's life even if he had not prayed for a longer life just because a longer life turned out to be best in the situation.¹³ Examples such as these can be multiplied; the point is that premises (4) and (6) of the divine goodness problem argument cannot be validly inferred from prior premises if the goodness of a state of affairs can be affected by being brought about in response to prayer.¹⁴

I have argued that there may not be just one 'best' available to God, and that even if there is, responsiveness to prayer could be a constitutive feature of that best; if either of these arguments is correct, then the divine goodness problem is defeated. But we can go further. I will now argue that divine goodness gives us reason to think that prayer is efficacious, given certain assumptions about human good and facts about human developmental psychology.

A reason to think prayer is efficacious

Let us accept that if God is perfectly good, then God loves every person, and desires what is good for every person. Let us also suppose, with the mainstream of the Christian tradition, that the greatest good for any human being is to be in as close a loving relationship with God as possible.¹⁵ We have already seen that the Augustinian defence of the practice of prayer in general was based on the idea that prayer changes the one who prays by increasing that person's capacity for relationship with God. If a similar relational benefit could be found that required God responding to at least some requests, then a reason will have been found to think that prayer is efficacious if God is perfectly good. I will argue that there are relational benefits uniquely provided by efficacious petitionary prayer. So the form of the argument is this:

10. If efficacious petitionary prayer can uniquely enhance the divine-human relationship, then we have reason to think that prayer is efficacious if God is good.
11. Efficacious petitionary prayer can uniquely enhance the divine-human relationship.

Therefore,

12. We have reason to think that prayer is efficacious if God is good.

What follows will be concerned with supporting premise (11) of the above argument.

Attention and intimacy

Augustine's response to the divine omniscience problem of prayer drew a connection between the practice of prayer and capacity for close relationship with God; however, his reply does not require the efficacy of petitionary prayer to obtain the benefit. In order to make the case that there are relational benefits that *do* require the efficacy of prayer, I will first present a view of relational closeness and how it is developed for humans, and then use that picture to show how efficacious prayer could enhance relationships between God and humans.

Relational closeness is increased by intimacy and personal presence, and both of these are mutually supporting. I take 'intimacy' between two people to be an ongoing state of relational closeness that requires a certain kind of willing mutual sharing between those people. This sharing involves both self-revelation to the other, and a caring welcome of the other's self-revelation. In order to do this, both parties must be present to one another. But there are different ways of being present. For example, when students are present in class, it merely means something like being 'here and now', such that immediate interaction is available; but when lovers are basking in one another's presence, there is an intense interactive focusing of attention on one another. Eleonore Stump refers to the former sort of presence as 'minimal personal presence', and the latter sort as 'significant personal presence' (Stump (2010), 110–111). Minimal personal presence, she notes, is required for the development of 'mutual closeness', a state which I take to be roughly the same as what I intend by 'intimacy' (*ibid.*). This intimacy, in turn, allows for (or is partially constitutive of) significant personal presence.

Attention plays a critical role in developing relational closeness. In this context, attending to someone is more than just having an awareness of that person. One must have the capacity to focus one's attention on the other person as another *person* similar to oneself, and recognize when oneself is the object of the other's attention. *Shared attention* occurs when two persons attend to the same object, each with the awareness of the other's attending to that object, and an awareness of the other's awareness of each one's awareness (Hobson (2005), 185ff.).¹⁶ Shared attention comes in two main types: dyadic and triadic. Dyadic attention behaviour, or *mutual attention*, is the sharing of eye contact and affection between two people, for example, as between an infant and a parent. It is not merely looking at each other, but involves an attentive responsiveness of each to the attention of the other. Triadic attention behaviour, or 'joint attention', is sharing attention with a social partner of some third object or event, such that both parties are attending to that third object or event, as well as to each other's attending to it (Naber *et al.* (2008), 143). Recent studies in developmental psychology have provided evidence that engagement in dyadic attention is an essential developmental foundation for the ability to engage in triadic or 'joint attention' behaviour (Leekam & Ramsden (2006), 185), and have strongly correlated dyadic and

triadic attention behaviours in infants with the development of communicative ability, social understanding, and social relationships (Clifford & Dissanayake (2009), 1369). Normal human infants are now known to demonstrate a heightened interest in the faces of others from within hours of birth, demonstrating an emotional response to the attention of others (Bruce & Young (2012), 362ff.). By the age of four months, normally developing infants show awareness of when others are or aren't paying attention to them, and will actively seek attention; by six to eight months, infants will typically have begun engaging in joint attention behaviour (Reddy (2005), 96). To reach maturity relationally and socially, one must have the capacity for joint attention; but mutual attention is needed prior to joint attention. Vasudevi Reddy identifies three reasons why engagement in mutual attention is crucial for infants: first, it shows that the infant has the capacity for receiving the attention of others; second, it shows that the infant has an interest in receiving the attention of others; third, it gives the infant experience necessary for growing in the understanding of attention necessary for normal relationships (*ibid.*, 105). The development of these abilities is part of normal human cognitive, affective, and social/relational growth, and the impairment of these abilities is correlated with disorders that involve relational problems (Naber *et al.* (2008), 143).

If God is the creator of human beings, then it seems reasonable to assume that the way human beings develop in their ability to engage in good, healthy relationships with one another can provide clues to how humans might develop in relational closeness with God. According to classical theism, God is omnipresent; however, since significant personal presence requires mutuality, God cannot be unilaterally significantly present to those who are not willing to be present to God. Nevertheless, God is always minimally personally present, for those who will be willing to grow in intimacy with God. Prayer in general involves one focusing attention on God to at least some degree, and an omniscient, perfectly loving God is always 'attending' to all people and all situations. There is an apparent parallel between dyadic and triadic attention, on the one hand, and petitionary prayer for oneself and for others, on the other hand.

Prayer for oneself can be seen as a form of mutual (dyadic) attention between the one praying and God. If God makes the provision of some goods depend on prayer, then God encourages us to attend to him in a way we would perhaps otherwise not. We are encouraged in our spiritual infancy to have an interest in receiving the attention of God. Reddy suggests that mutual attention 'is the most direct sharing of attention and the most powerful experience of others' attention that one can have' (Reddy (2005), 85). One is reminded of Augustine's description of 'a turning of the heart' to God in prayer that eventuates in the ability to 'bear the pure light' of God's presence, and 'also to remain in it . . . with ineffable joy'. In mutual attention, there is not only the awareness of each other by those sharing attention, but also an awareness of the attention of the other to oneself. Of course, one way the analogy breaks down is that God, unlike a human parent, is always 'attending' to everything. So we cannot, by our actions, cause God to

attend to something to which he was not already attending. But God can respond to prayer by providing requested goods. That is, the mutual responsiveness to each other's attention required for mutual attention can be satisfied through God's responsiveness to a petitioner's request, even if it will not be satisfied through a modulation in God's attention to the petitioner. There is also an ancillary benefit: witnessing an answer to prayer is a way for the petitioner to become aware of God's responsiveness to herself, which can then aid the development of intimacy with God and the significant personal presence of God. In both of these ways – though constitutively contributing to mutual attention, and through enabling awareness of divine responsiveness – efficacious prayer can uniquely contribute to the greatest human good: intimacy with God. Therefore, the goodness of God should lead us to expect prayers for our own needs and desires to be efficacious.¹⁷

Now consider petitionary prayer for third parties, which is the type that is most problematic for current defences of efficacious petitionary prayer.¹⁸ Even if a good God might allow me to miss out on some good if I don't request it, why would God allow someone else to miss out on a good (or best) because I don't request it on that person's behalf? There is a ready analogy to be made between this sort of prayer and joint (triadic) attention: in praying for other people in other situations, one engages in joint attention together with God of those other people and situations. Peter Hobson says that one of the stages of developing joint attention is when one 'engages with someone else's engagement with the world – and is "moved"' (Hobson (2005), 188). He describes being 'moved' as 'to sense the psychological orientation of the other in oneself, but as the other's' (*ibid.*, 201), and expands on the necessity of being 'moved' in order to have joint attention: 'One can only have joint attention if one has the capacity to "join" another person – which means that one needs to be able to share experiences with others, registering intersubjective linkage – and at the same time remain separate' (*ibid.*). Believing God to be omniscient and perfectly good, we 'point to' something or someone else in prayer, asking God to attend *in action* to that situation or person with us. God's waiting to provide some good to someone else until such time as we request that good for that person in prayer, or even making that good provisional upon our praying for it, may manifest God's desire for a deep relationship with us, a relationship in which we 'attend together' and even engage in joint action in the world by way of petitionary. God, in allowing us to do this, allows us to share attention with himself, jointly attend to the world, and even jointly act, deepening our relationship with him, and our affective connection to others, distant as they may be. Thus, borrowing Hobson's terms, we 'join' God, sensing God's own love for others in ourselves, while yet remaining separate. If God never responded to our prayers for others, an opportunity for intimacy and significant personal presence would be lost.

Understanding prayer as a sort of shared attention activity between God and the one praying shows the relational benefits gained by prayer for third parties in a

fairly straightforward way, and it seems that a model of prayer based on shared attention can offer a deeper understanding of prayer for oneself as well. When this attention has born the fruit of mutual attention, we are better positioned to understand our own relation to God. Consider also what Hobson said: that in sharing attention one ‘joins’ the other, but remains separate. In prayer we can join God, and come to understand that God desires us as partners, to work together with him. Responding to petitions for others allows God to allow us to join with him in loving action in the world, by being ‘moved’ by our prayers to intervene in various situations.¹⁹ Insofar as such joint action manifests a deeper, more intimate relationship than if such joint action were not attainable, states of affairs brought about through such joint action manifest greater goodness than they would otherwise. Therefore the goodness of God should lead us to expect that such joint action is attainable.

Conclusion

The efficacy of petitionary prayer is under no threat from the goodness of God. Through a careful reconstruction of the argument from divine goodness against the efficacy of prayer, utilizing a revised reasons account of answered prayer, I have attempted to show that the supposed problem rests on dubious premises and inferences, so no defensive argument is needed. Nevertheless, there is a good defensive argument available, based on the shared attention model of prayer. Efficacious prayer uniquely contributes to intimacy with God by enabling mutual attention, joint attention, and even joint action in the world with God, all of which contribute to, and even partially constitute, deeper intimacy in the divine-human relationship. Given the great relational benefits to be gained by responding to prayer, both for oneself and for others, the goodness of God leads us to expect prayer to be efficacious. This is not to say that all or even most prayers will be answered. But we can expect that, if God is good, sometimes prayers will be answered; and so, with confidence that prayer is efficacious, we may ‘pray and not lose heart’.²⁰

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Notes

1. I think it is fair to say 'psychological' here, since it applies in the classical sense of the term: having to do with the soul. Augustine does say that this effect is to open the one praying up to what God would like to give. But it's not clear whether he means that God is answering the prayer, or giving some other benefit than what was specifically requested. For this reason I am treating it as primarily a 'psychological' justification of prayer.
2. I am assuming that just being asked to do something, particularly by someone whom one loves, provides one with a *prima facie* reason to do that thing. Perhaps a request to do something bad, even if coming from a loved one, would not give one even a *prima facie* reason to do the thing requested. I am inclined to think that it does, but a reason that is outweighed by the moral disvalue of the request. Those who don't share this inclination may add the qualifier that the request must be for something good for it to give God a reason.
3. To see why, consider a parent buying a toy for his child upon the child's requesting the toy. It is never the case that the parent's *only* reason for buying the toy is *just* the child's asking for it. Other reasons, such as 'I want to make my child happy', or 'my child has been annoying me so long I'd rather buy the toy than hear another minute of whining', or even 'this child is *my* child', will always be playing a role. But that hardly means that the parent wasn't responding to the child's request in buying the toy for the child.
4. Davison notes that precision is difficult at this point, but merely observes that there are 'clear cases' of interpretations too strong and too weak.
5. Even this unwieldy account may not be sufficiently nuanced. Consider (3b): it seems that it could be the case that God would have brought about what was requested even if it were not requested, but that God brings it about at the particular time or in the particular way he does in response to prayer. Surely such a case would be an example of efficacious prayer. Nevertheless, I will stick with this version for present purposes.
6. Davison's version of the divine goodness problem is based on arguments previously given by Basinger (Davison (2009), 302 n. 20), who in turn borrowed his formulation from Stump (Basinger (1983), 26).
7. Davison uses the terms 'must' and 'is obligated to' as interchangeable; he notes that he knows there is a difference, but is ignoring the difference. Since he doesn't think the difference makes a difference here, I will stick with the term I find most appropriate: 'must'. See Davison (2009), 302, n. 21.
8. A number of philosophers have argued against the idea that there is one unique best possible world. I do not argue for that conclusion here, but only ask the sceptical question. I think that the claim that there is one best possible world is not obviously true, and so the burden is on the one who assumes it to show why

it is plausible. This reply, if it is right, would also apply to a weakened form of the premise, in which only 'important' prayers are in its scope. This is apparently the view of taken by Basinger, when he says that 'it is then questionable whether petitioning is efficacious in the sense that it can, *to any significant degree*, affect earthly states of affairs (Basinger (1983), 41; emphasis added). The reply to the divine goodness argument I have given here is similar in some ways to that offered by Parker and Rettler, who argue that there could be 'tied worlds', such that God allows prayer to 'break the tie', as it were, in deciding which to actualize. However, they also argue that the more significant the thing prayed for, the less likely the world in which the prayer is answered is tied with another, and so the less likely that prayer will be efficacious (Parker & Rettler (2017), 182). I make no such concession in this argument, and I think such concessions are mistaken. This will become apparent in the next section.

9. The argument in this section is inspired in part by Cohoe (2014), in which Cohoe advances a Thomistic account of the way creaturely causation adds goodness to the world, and uses that account to argue for a distinctive goodness made available through the institution of petitionary prayer. The argument here reaches the same conclusion, but without relying on a particular account of the goodness of creaturely causation.
10. This is a controversial claim, used here for illustrative purposes. One reason for supposing it would be true is if forgiveness entails relational reconciliation, and that relational reconciliation requires wilful confessing of offences and seeking of forgiveness by offending parties. This is different from views that hold forgiveness to be (possibly) a unilateral act. For a view of forgiveness that requires requesting forgiveness, see Geivett (2012). For a view of forgiveness as a unilateral act not requiring a request, see Hughes (2015).
11. Quoted here: <<http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/18/politics/trump-has-never-sought-forgiveness/>>.
12. If what is not possible cannot be what is best, then it may be more accurate to say that the forgiveness of Trump's sins is not best unless it is requested Trump.
13. Remember that we have been granting the assumption that a good God would do what is best in this section, and so, since God did extend Hezekiah's life, we assume that it was best for Hezekiah's life to be extended.
14. There is a similar argument advanced by Howard-Snyder & Howard-Snyder (2010), where they argue that, in some cases, a prayer can change the relevant moral landscape sufficiently to provide God with a reason to do what God would not otherwise have had sufficient reason to do.
15. See, for example, Augustine *Confessions* X.xxii and Thomas Aquinas, *STI-II*, Q3, A8. If one doubts whether this view is really mainstream in spite of the views of Augustine and Thomas, then the claim may be weakened to '*a mainstream view in the Christian tradition*'.
16. Characterizing the phenomenology of shared attention is a notoriously difficult matter, and probably not adequately described in this manner. There is an obvious threat of regress in this 'recursive' way of describing the phenomena. I will not attempt to do a better job here – if the reader requires a better characterization, then I encourage the reader to reflect on the reader's own experience of sharing attention with another; I can do no better.
17. Remember that this is not to claim that every prayer must be answered in the sense captured by the RRA; rather, the claim is that some prayers will be. That is, the relational benefit accrues by God occasionally answering prayers, and not by always answers prayers.
18. For example, Eleonore Stump, in her seminal paper on petitionary prayer, noted that more work was needed to account for efficacious prayer for third parties (Stump (1979), 89).
19. Notice the difference from the benefit proposed by Nicholas Smith and Andrew Yip. They argue that a sincere vow of partnership should be central to the act of petitioning, such that in asking God to do *x*, one offers oneself as an agent for accomplishing *x*, even if one doesn't at the time see how one can be such an agent (Smith & Yip (2010), 405). Such a benefit, however, does not itself require that God answers prayer. The kind of joint action I have described here does require efficacious prayer.
20. From Luke 18:1 (English Standard Version).