

A few years back a man came up to me with a practical question. He said, "I just finished the training to become a communion minister at church; what do I have to do next to get on the schedule in the parish?" I said, "Sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor, and then come back." He did not take that deal, and we don't make such requirements. It amazes me, though, how simple it can be to receive God's grace. A training session allows you to minister the body and blood of Christ to your brothers and sisters. A single class prepares parents for the baptism of their children. Going to confession doesn't take much time, yet God forgives all your sins. The generous grace of God seems unbalanced. We could never purchase it or return something equal for the favors we receive from God.

Yet, when things don't go our way, we try to cut a deal with God – as if we could. God, if you make that girl talk to me, I'll say a rosary every day for the rest of my life. God, if I get that job, I'll give \$1000 to charity. God, if you cure this illness, I'll go to mass every week. God, just let me live until my children graduate, and then you can take me. And so on.

It's natural to pray this way because this is how we handle many deals in life. I give you something, and you give me something similar in return. But it's also natural to give without expecting anything back. We can never repay the person who gives us love, an education, a career, or the person who saves your life, nor could we purchase such a gift in advance.

So even though we bargain with God in prayer, we don't get too far. God doesn't need anything we have; we can appeal to God's goodness, stress our unworthiness, and ask on that basis. Our prayer gives glory because it affirms that the only one who can do anything about this situation is God.

Saint Paul writes to the Romans, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways." Then, as an example of how far God is beyond our reach, Paul asks this rhetorical question: "Who has given the Lord anything that he might be repaid?" We have no bargaining chips. On the surface, this only adds to the frustration when things aren't going our way. If we had some leverage with God, maybe we could get somewhere with our prayers. But if we had leverage, then God would not be God. God is beyond human control.

Saint Paul writes this passage to Christians who are surprised that God was calling both Jews and Gentiles to Jesus Christ. No one foresaw that these different religions would find common ground in Christianity, but they did. Paul says we cannot know the mind of the Lord, and for him that is not a source of frustration. It is a source of wonder. He trusts that whatever God has in store for us is better than we could ask or imagine.

We all bargain with God. We may think we can offer something in return for what we need. But we can't. Prayer is most effective when our entire lives are pleasing to God and when we trust that God's plan is best.