

*“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*5“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*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. 17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18so 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.*

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

When I grew up I was paid for what I did. Whether I mowed the lawn, baled hay, or sprayed a fence row to kill the trees and bushes I was an hourly employee. (Interestingly enough, doing dishes or sweeping the carpet - inside work, didn't count) I worked for my father or for his business. My reward was the check that I would cash.

But sometimes there was another reward altogether. Maybe I had done a particularly good job of cleaning the garage, or trimmed the grass around all the trees and fence posts in our yard. One time it was mowing the hay field without leaving a number of patches of standing hay. At these moments my reward came when my father returned home for dinner or supper. I showed him what I had done, I saw his pleasure, his words expressed his delight in what I had done. My heart leaped in joy.

“Be careful not to do your good works in public in order to attract attention. If you do your Father in heaven will not reward you. So when you give to the poor, don't announce it with trumpet fanfare. This is what hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets in order to be praised by people. I can guarantee this truth: That will be their only reward. When you

give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your contributions privately. Your Father sees what you do in private. He will reward you.”

They tell me that if I want this to be a congregation that gives well, that I should keep tabs on the giving. They tell me that I should take note of changes in giving, give a phone call when someone has stopped giving or has made a special gift. I refuse to do it. I refuse to even take a look at what you give. For if my notice and comment become a reward for you, maybe you would no longer give in order to give joy to God.

Everything Jesus says in our gospel tonight is a call to do what we do for God. Giving to the poor, praying, fasting or denying ourselves might be done to impress others. I can live my whole life as if what you think of me is most important. Then my whole life is an appearance, acting. That is what the word hypocrite means - actor. I pretend to be concerned about the poor when really I am concerned about your applause. I pretend to pray to God with deep sincerity and feeling when really I am thinking of you, what you think of my words. I pretend to deny myself, acting as if I am giving up things for God when really I am only trying to fool you.

For me being an actor is a constant temptation, a sin that I commit over and over. I can forget all about God as I think about you. I can let you, my neighbors, be my reason for what I do. I can live as a practical atheist, as if God is not the reason, and source and center of my life.

Jesus reminds us that your life is not about appearances but about God. Your Father sees what you do in private. He will reward you.

If you and I give to the poor in order to do what is expected, we will figure out a decent percentage. We will check out what others are doing, peg our giving to doing our fair share - kind of like me working for an hourly wage.

But if I know the joy it gives God when the hungry have enough to eat, then my giving is like my working to bring my father pleasure. That was my reward - my father's pleasure.

When you grow in faith, and in giving, and in service and in praying, there is joy in heaven. God is worshipped and honored in you, and there is joy in heaven.

But if you seek to grow for your own sense of accomplishment, and give so that you can see smiles on the faces of those you have helped, or pray so that you will have more peace of mind, then as rewarding as these activities may be, there will be no joy in heaven.

No one told me to seek to please my father. I simply wanted to out of love.

So it is with you and God. God has poured out all of God's love on you in Jesus Christ. Jesus went to the cross for you. Jesus suffered there for you. Jesus gave his whole self in love for you.

I hope that you will do the same, give your whole self in love for him.

A final thought. Back when I was trimming around fence posts, and waiting for my father to get home, I was mostly thinking about me. My little deed of a couple hours work seemed so large to me. But I think I forgot that the one I loved worked six days a week, and long hours to provide for me. I did not thank him very often.

Whatever we are doing to bring joy to God, I hope we will never stop thinking of all that God is doing to provide and care for us.

And give thanks.