

“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.”³ “But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,⁴ so 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.”⁶ “But 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.

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.¹⁰ Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.¹² 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.

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.

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.

I remember late winter when I was a freshman in high school. Milan school was building an addition that year, the basement of which was a long open room with a dirt floor. The track coach decided to get an early start on the season so there I was running. Along with a whole host fellow students I was running. Though I thought I

was giving it my all, my coaches made it clear they were not impressed. To them I was clearly someone who wanted to appear to be working hard. And they were right. I was only there because it was expected. Required. Often I see young boys or girls out running to get into shape - working hard with no crowd cheering, no coach watching, working hard because it is important to her or him. I was never one of them. I did what was demanded, but only that. My heart was not in it.

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.

I really did not want to go out for track but I did want to impress Mr. Levine. He was the basketball coach – he suggested that track would really help my basketball career. I wanted him to think I was doing my best.

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. But when you give alms do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your alms may be done in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

I remember running down a long corridor in that basement with a cement block wall on either side. No coaches were in that hall – no eyes to see me slow my gait and drag along – dogging it until I turned the corner and was under the watchful gaze of the coaches once more.

And when you pray do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray on the street corners and in the synagogues, so that they may be seen by others. But when 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.

I remember the day I got a side ache running in the basement of that school. Mr. Taylor or Mr. Johnson – I can't remember which – thought I should tough it out – run through the pain. Show some courage. I sat and rested. Shouldn't they treat me better – I was hurting.

And when you fast, do not be dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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.

In a way giving alms, prayer, and fasting are the conditioning of the spiritual person. Lent is the season of preparing ourselves for the contests of life. For those contests are surely coming – struggles with temptation – with illness – with the death of those we love – our own suffering and dying. When one who has never practiced prayer, or self-control, or letting go of this life's goods and possessions is suddenly thrust into a life and death struggle he may be overwhelmed – fall into despair – feel cut off from God. Lent is a season of conditioning.

But our Lord Jesus is suggesting that it is not enough to show up for practice – go through the motions of denying self in giving alms – in fasting – not enough to say the words of praying – no matter how beautiful and impressive those words may be. Your Lord Jesus wants your heart.

The way my coaches wanted my heart. Me. All of me.

Jesus wants you like that. Not a prayer that will impress the crowds but a prayer that is speaking from your heart to the heart of God.

Not gifts given to the poor so your name will appear on some list and your neighbors will be impressed but gifts given from the heart in love.

Not giving up chocolate or desserts so that you can tell all your friends what you are giving up for Lent but turning away from whatever threatens to control you.

One thing I learned from hearing the results of the home meetings is how much we would like the community that surrounds us to think of us as loving – caring – giving. But I think Jesus does not care what the community thinks of us but he cares what we are – that we be loving and caring and giving.

I am not sure that my coaches were all that interested in me – probably they were more concerned about how I would make them look.

But that is not how it is with Jesus. Jesus does not want to appear to be the treasure in your heart – he wants to be the one your heart most treasures. Today. Forever.