

*“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.*

If my mother had been there I never would have done it.

Sue and Beth and I were in a grocery store in Charlottesville, Virginia last Thursday.

Sue and I were there to watch Beth swim. We'd stopped in the grocery store to buy some fruit. The apples on display were huge - too big for me to eat one alone. But I spied one just my size down underneath. As I worked it free suddenly two apples were bouncing down the aisle. I picked them up and put them back on the display where some poor unsuspecting customer would not notice their bruises and buy them.

If my mother had been there I never would have done it. She would have been so disappointed in me. But she was not - she died many years ago - and so before Sue and my daughter Beth and before God I returned the bruised apples to their place, thinking the store personnel were at fault for stacking the fruit that way.

I thought of my mother, of how hard it was for me to do things that disappointed her. I had no fear of punishment from her, but I never wanted to disappoint her. She gave herself for my sisters and brother and me. I did not want to do anything that made her think less of me.

When Jesus talks of God, so often he uses the word, Father. *“When you give alms do not sound a trumpet before you but go into your room and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*When you pray don't be like the hypocrites wanting to be seen, but go into your room and shut the door and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*When you fast do not look dismal to be seen by others, but fast to be seen by your Father and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Your Father - God.

Father.

Jesus never explains why he taught to call God Father. I don't think Jesus' using this name has anything to do with maleness. God is neither male nor female. Rather I think of the relationship of a child to a parent when I think of God as Father.

It is a relationship that is very one-sided. God is providing and protecting and giving even when we are giving no thought at all to God. It is just the way things are with parents and their children.

When the relationship is right it is not all about rewards and punishments - threats and promises. Love is at the very center.

Even when the relationship has been failed by the child, the parent works to restore and renew the relationship. The two year old's temper tantrum is not the end of a mother caring for a daughter.

Jesus teaches us to speak of God as our father. "Your Father in heaven will reward you," he promises.

I think of another family moment. In years when I lived in North Dakota once a year my family would journey to Ohio to see the relatives here: my parents while they were alive - my grandparents, my sisters and brother and their families. So many years the first stop was in Clyde, Ohio at the Eschelmann Nursing Home to visit my grandfather, Grant Hill.

Grandpa had had a stroke. For fourteen years he lived unable to speak, unable to walk. I remember going to his room, greeting him, taking his left hand in mine. Then I and Sue and the kids would sit there and try to talk to him - for everyone but me he was mostly a stranger. We were doing our duty, talking to him, bringing him some candy. We even had the kids give him a hug though it made them uncomfortable to do that. Then when enough time had passed on the clock, we were on our way - relieved.

Our visits must have seemed awful to him - so uncomfortable were we - so stiff, so formal, so intent on doing what we should.

I think of Lent, of prayer, of our giving to the poor. God is a little like Grandpa sometimes - subjected to our doing what we think is required of us. The language of Lent too often has become language of obligation, putting in required time, making required sacrifice.

Had my mother lived to take her father's place in a nursing home, I do not think that my visiting her would have felt like duty. I would not have struggled to think of what to say to her as I did Grandpa, for she would have wanted to hear. She always wanted to hear.

Your loving Father waits to hear from you, waits to delight as you give to the poor. Time for prayer, costly gifts given to the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters, these will bring your Father in heaven joy.

Your Father who hears in secret, who sees in secret will reward you.