

*“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.*

I listen to WCLV. A regular feature on that radio station is the Wall Street Journal Report. So every morning before I even get in the shower I am likely to hear how the markets are expected to do today. When I open the newspaper I am likely to read about interest rates and the economy. In Newsweek magazine I encounter advice about investing and managing money. And every time I walk into the locker room at the EMH Health and Fitness center the television is turned to a station with stock quotes moving across the bottom of the screen and seemingly endless discussion of the economy.

Is it any wonder that most days my heart is wrapped in a vague uneasiness that someone else is getting ahead of me in the financial race of life?

When the TV at EMH is not tuned to financial news, then on the screen is a game. Maybe the radio station to which you listen lets you know every twenty minutes what is going on in the world of sports. At the breakfast table I read the PD to catch up on yesterday's games and trades and injuries.

Is it any wonder that when my favorite team wins I feel lifted, when they lose I feel defeated?

And then there is Hollywood, and the soaps, afternoons with Oprah, sitcoms, movies, radio stations playing our favorite tunes, novels that wrap me up in lives more interesting than my own.

Imagine me as a piece of clay, and imagine all of these things that fill my day as hands, shaping and molding me. What will they make of me? What will I think is most important for my children, my grandchildren, my time, my money?

I think of Adam, a piece of clay, formed from the soil, shaped, molded by God and then breathed in life by God's breath. What about me – you?

At no other time in history has a culture so entered a people, filling every moment with sound and image and entertainment - shaping, molding, claiming.

How might you think about Lent this year? Lent could become a time of slipping out of the hands of the media and the culture. Lent could become a time of walking into the house and not turning on the TV, riding in the car and not turning on the radio, a time of sitting down in the chair and not opening the novel. What would happen then?

Would you pray? Read the scriptures? Drive to the nearest nursing home and walk through the hallway, talking with a few of the persons you encounter there? Many of you are good givers of alms – giving your money to help those who have less than you do. Could you give yourself as well?

How would you be changed, shaped, molded, if you were to put yourself into the hands of God these forty days?

I do not know. In a way turning off the sights and sounds of our culture is like the children of Israel leaving Egypt. They got out into the wilderness and the first thing they wanted to do was to go back to the slavery. Turn off the TV for an evening and you are likely to feel anxiety. Decide to pray for half an hour and you will likely run out of things to say. Read the scriptures and you may nod off to sleep. To journey through the wilderness is never easier than staying in Egypt, for a time it is a lot more difficult.

But I know that your Lord Jesus wants you to belong to him. In him you will grow and flourish and bear much fruit – fed by our culture you will finally wither and die.

I know who waits for you at the end of your journey, who promises to walk with you along the way – he is the one who gave his life for you. He gives himself to you here, this day. In his hands you will be shaped into a work of beauty, a work of love, of kindness, of peace. Amen.