

Read also Jeremiah 17:5-14. Check out the service, which is recorded on www.fpcd.org.

A Facebook page has nearly 40,000 “likes” and over 6,000 are “talking about this.” It’s a page about a little boy named Jayden Lamb. From Midland, Michigan, Jayden died from cancer last November, just shy of his ninth birthday. His last sentence was “I’m never getting married, Daddy. God needs me more.”

Two days after his death, his parents were in line at Starbucks and spontaneously decided to pay for the order of the customer behind them in the drive-through, just as a small gesture of goodness to the community, who had been so supportive. Then, after his funeral they went to Walmart and paid for a family’s layaway bill, saying, “We told the worker that it had to be for toys and that it had to be in honor of Jayden.” They wrote what they had done on Facebook, “It is just so amazing to be able to do something for someone else.” They are Christians.

That act of virtue started a chain reaction, as people all over their town began doing acts of piety, acts of almsgiving – it developed into “Pay it Forward, Jayden style.” People paid for other people’s meals; they paid for people’s groceries; they gave huge tips to waitresses. One anonymous person put a diamond ring in the Salvation Army’s bell-ringer’s bucket.

One day a few weeks later, Jayden’s parents were out for lunch and when the bill came it said, “\$0 owed, paid for in honor of Jayden Lamb.

Jesus continues His Sermon on the Mount, now discussing three acts of religious expression. He calls them acts of “piety” or “righteousness” or “virtue,” and those acts are almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. We will talk about them for the next three weeks, which is appropriate for Lent, a time of spiritual introspection.

Acts of piety are simple expressions that originate in the heart that are consistent with the action of God. Ancient philosophers called these acts “spiritual harmony,” because it is something we do which shows us fulfilling God’s law.

Spiritual harmony is consistency between what we say we believe and how we act that out. It’s where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. So keep that in mind as we read the passage.
READ Matthew 6:1-4

Many things have been given, both in the church and outside the church. This church has experienced some gifts over the years. If you go to the hospital down the street you will probably see evidence of almsgiving.

Yet Jesus knew there was a struggle over this. Watch this video of Larry David and Ted Danson: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqncCjxGqGw> (watch 0-1:34 and 5:13-31)

So that video aptly describes the struggle. Both men, whether covertly or overtly, sought the praise of others. We are just so human!

Jesus knows, and I believe His words are to help us avoid a major pitfall; that of being defined by the approval of others. Seeking human approval can pull us right out of a close relationship with God and the core values of the kingdom of God.

I remember graduating from seminary and hoping for those special awards for good grades they give in normal colleges— but nothing ever came! No letter commending me. No rewards . . . at the ceremony they just had personal testimonies about how God had called people to ministry. It was such a downer. I thought, *why did I work so hard?*

I even prayed about it, but Jesus answered, “Graduation ceremonies? I don’t usually attend those meetings.”

So the question is, how do we handle that need for acclaim?

We tend to try and fulfill that need by seeking it from those we can see. It’s built into the fiber of our culture. There are accolades for giving, for grades, for credentials, for resumes, for accomplishments, but Jesus says we are not to seek them as if they can make us who we are.

Many have made their mark on the world. Without almsgiving, libraries and museums, universities and hospitals, and cities and nations would not be built. Jesus does not say, *never give before others*, that is, He’s not saying do not ever give publicly. He doesn’t say, *all giving must always be anonymous*. He talks rather, about that inner attitude, that inner need for praise or acknowledgement or affirmation, which is “giving in order to be seen by them.”

Why does this matter? Is Jesus taking all the fun out of giving? I mean, why sacrifice, if you can’t get a little pat on the back for it?

But Jesus requires you to go deeper. He’s teaching about the real way to connect with who you are. He says “beware” because you are actually not defined or fulfilled by the praise of other people at all. And if you try to be, you will be missing the whole essence of having a relationship with God.

One reason we always have a reading from both the Old Testament and the New Testament in our worship services is so that we can see the unity of the Bible. So Jeremiah said,
“Blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence.”

And he adds these words of God’s:

“I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve.”

Thus God, not the approval of others, is our audience. “Give in secret,” Jesus says.

The study of God is a study of an “other worldly realm,” a reality that you cannot reach by ordinary perception. That is often what makes religion so hard for people, especially educated people. God is spirit. God is hidden, numinous.

Yet God can make Himself known.

Jesus says, trust that. Give to God in secret. Don't even try to impress yourself.

Jesus' reason is that "God sees in secret." He is saying nothing is hidden from God. God is omnipresent and omniscient. This is a huge difference in Christianity over other faiths. This is what makes our faith entirely intimate and personal.

Jesus is also saying that what you do actually matters and is rewarded by God.

Can you make that shift and give your gift to God rather than for acclaim from people?

Can you trust God's reward?

What's the reward like? The reward is not always immediate, although sometimes it is.

Let's say God asks you to give, which God does. God is not asking for that because God needs the money. God wants you to learn something. His purpose is going to be to develop you so that you understand He is your source, not you yourself, and thus you learn to magnify the Lord.

God wants you to learn to mimic God. Giving is hard at first. It's like a child learning to ride a bike. Sometimes they don't even want to try, but the parent works with them. They fall, the parent insists they get up. They wobble and weave. It's hard. No reward for parent or child. But soon the child gets the hang of it and the bike becomes almost a part of them. They are no longer thinking about how to stop or turn – it has just become a part of them. They ride for joy.

And the parent is thrilled.

God is a rewarder. God develops your faith and character. When you give to get the accolades of others, they don't care about any of that stuff. With God, though, you are rewarded far beyond what you could ever ask or imagine.

And God is thrilled.

Jayden Lamb's parents decided to give in response to their heartbreaking loss. They did it as an act of faith, not to receive a reward. One month later their church, Messiah Lutheran in Midland, MI, adopted the attitude of giving. They filled an entire room with toys to give away to children for Christmas. (You can see the picture.) A video records, "We did this because it is good to have faith."

Jayden's father wonders, *is this what God needed him more for, a lesson of hope for humanity?*

Be assured as you give to God in secret, He will reward you beyond what you can imagine.

AMEN