The Bible is a great work of literature. It is studied not only by believers for its teachings and revelation. It has literary value. At times, it reads like the finest poetry. Today we have an example of superb writing as certain phrases are repeated. This gives emphasis to the point that is made again and again. Reading it feels like a singer who returns to a refrain after singing each verse. We commit the refrain to memory easily.

To be honest, Jesus makes quite the critical comment about some of the folks publicly performing penances. Three times Jesus says, “Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.” I think it is clear that the reward received comes from other human beings and not God. Permit me to share my own experience with earthly rewards. I am trying to say the times I receive attention or praise publicly. We can train people to work in public, receive attention and not become arrogant. I would go farther to say that we must train people to replace arrogance with gratitude and awe.

I first became aware of my status as a priest following my first Mass. The pastor had set out a kneeler for people to use when asking for my blessing. Having family members, parents, and brothers, ask for a blessing humbled me. I did not feel worthy to bless my parents whose blessing I had always sought first whenever I made a big decision. Travelling to Rome as a priest I had another eye-opening experience. The Swiss Guards who protect the entrances to the Vatican salute clergy like enlisted soldiers saluting an officer as the clergy pass by. I was not expecting this courtesy and learned not to return the salute. Then, in my pastoral visits to Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Puerto Rico I have had my hands kissed by parishioners as a sign of respect. This more than anything else is a real test.

A fool believes that these demonstrations of respect are deserved or necessary. A wiser person knows that these demonstrations of respect are intended for God and not the man wearing the collar. A brother of mind asking a blessing following my ordination knows I am as much a sinner as he is. The difference is that the Church has consecrated me for the purpose of making possible these blessed encounters with God through the sacraments.

It crossed my mind to ask people to not kiss my hands. It seemed too much respect for someone so lowly. This is true, but when the time is right, this display happens and both parties are enriched. We parish priests also feel awe in the presence of other clergy. I tell you truly that I still call priest friends who are now Bishops by their title Bishop, Archbishop or Cardinal when I cross paths with them. I could easily call them by their first name, but in my mind the role of bishop carries a significance that changes everything. I will always remember when such and such was a priest friend of mine, but becoming a bishop means I have to share that friend with others. To call them bishop says I understand that this priest is set aside for a much greater flock than I can understand as a parish priest.

It is the unique privilege and trail for priests to stand with people before God. Reciting the words, I absolve you from your sins, releases a sorrowful sinner from punishment, but it is the Holy Spirit who removes the sin, and the words of the priest are mere instruments of the unseen Holy Spirit.

Keeping in mind the unseen God in these encounters between the faithful and God is part of the mindset of every priest. This is something that can be taught and can be become a habit. Regular prayer with God increases the priest’s own understanding of God’s presence in these special moments of grace. Those who lack the training or fail to make humility a habit of priestly life are subject to the criticism given by Jesus. “Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.”

All of us should stand back with horror in our eyes at the thought that fame and attention on earth are enough. Of course, we know people whose greatest ambition is the National Football League Hall of Fame or Cooperstown in Baseball or a Nobel Prize for Science or election to an office or Hollywood Stardom. If that is all a person wants from this life, I pity them. As Christians, we may not all have the skill for the Hall of Fame or a mind to win a Nobel Prize or the talent and looks for Hollywood stardom. We do have something else that is ours to hold and cherish or better to plant and water and protect till it blooms.

Every baptized member of the church seeks the same reward that is dispensed according to God’s solemn judgment. We enter the presence of God in eternal life; or we make reparation for sins not yet satisfied in purgatory while awaiting our entrance into eternal life; or we are damned to hell.

I believe that Jesus is stating that those whose reward is given on earth are those who are not given payment in heaven. The moral of the story is that all of us must keep ourselves empty in a way of speaking. In fact, the more attention we receive, the more accolades we garner, the more we must empty ourselves of the attention. Frankly, the more titles we wear the busier we become and the more impact our decisions make on others.

The wise will respond to more attention with a feeling of unworthiness, holy fear, anxiety, and caution. If we gain honors and do not become fearful and anxious and cautious, then we are edging closer to the fall from grace that happens to the foolish. IF you think about it, what I am talking about is a kind of fasting and abstinence.

Giving up chocolate or alcohol is one thing, but to turn away from the attraction of earthly attention and accolades is for some a much harder goal. By training our minds and spirit we can deny ourselves unnecessary attention. Anyone who has been recognized or promoted knows that to some extent, hard work done well is usually rewarded. It is not always necessary to promote ourselves. We can train ourselves to put our heads to the grinding stone and do what is worthwhile in an excellent way. We shall occasionally be rewarded and not lose ourselves in the process. We are lost when the desire for attention drives us to ignore the eternal gifts God has in store for us.

Let us pause now as we embark on Lent to consider all the rich gifts God has in store for us after this life. The gifts I have in mind are not material things that we have known on earth but the relationships we have begun on earth with God and God’s people, those that surround us and those even unknown to us. We yearn to see our God face to face, to see Jesus as the apostles knew him after he was raised from the dead.

The secret is to meditate on the words of Jesus: “But when you give alms, when you pray, when you fast, “Your father who sees you in secret will repay you.” Let us seek that repayment after this life.