This is not the Sunday where I was going to preach on stewardship but if I was there is a really good verse from today’s readings relating to the topic. Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” So just remember that as you are filling out your pledge card – everything she had. Okay but now to your regularly scheduled sermon. And for that I want to go with what proceeds this little stewardship vignette. Jesus says, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” This passage is kind of like in the world of physics where light is both a wave and a particle -- it is both very straightforward and very complex and it raises many questions. Is it a mere warning against hypocrisy? Is it a specific condemnation against appearing religious? I mean there are other places where Jesus does condemn this specific type of hypocrisy so maybe that is what it is about. But maybe it is just condemning long prayers or just the long prayers of the hypocrites or just long things in general like long sermons. I could get on board with that. But since I am sure you really want to know what I think let me give you my take on it.

I agree to an extent that this passage is a condemnation of hypocrisy but I am also a little hesitant about this being the sole takeaway. The reason I am hesitant is because hypocrisy is a personal failing and one that does not direct us to anything larger. Because, broadly speaking, there are two directions we can go in stopping hypocritical behavior – we can get rid of the bad behavior or we can get rid of the good behavior. In other words, if the scribes devoured widows’ houses all day long and skipped the prayers, they would not be hypocrites. There life would be a unified whole, not a good whole but unified and hypocrisy free whole none the less. And so, if you want a little takeaway from the hypocrisy discussion it is this: if you desire to stop being a hypocrite make sure you are getting rid of the bad behavior not the good one. But onto my point. I think there might be a slightly different and more prescient warning for us in terms of how we live our lives. Let me explain what I mean.

If you remember, we had this pandemic thing not so long ago and one of the characteristics of it was everything had to be shut down so we could flatten the hills and straighten the curve or maybe that was the theme song from *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Whatever the reasoning the outcome was that many, if not all, churches went virtual. Whether you tuned in live or watched a previously recorded service the constant was you were not here in Church but rather were peering at it through a screen. For the most part I found this reality tedious and boring because as I have said watching church on TV is a lot like watching church on TV. But here is the thing for all of its agony and mediocrity some churches did these broadcasts better than others. And for the most part the churches that did it better where generally larger with bigger budgets and staff. As a result of these resources, these churches had more camera angles, better microphones, professional editing and so on. But here is the question; were those churches with slicker production values better churches? Now please don’t think that I am saying that all churches with professional looking media are the spawn of Satan, rather what I am asking is whether you can tell anything about a church from there Sunday morning broadcast? Was this a complete picture or is there more to being a church?

One further example. Whenever I am in England, I love to go to Evensong at one of the cathedrals or college chapels. The music is magnificent and it is all so well done, but the fact of the matter is attendance at these services is usually comprised of just the choir and a bunch of American tourists. And so, while I love the beauty of this type of worship and I love things that are done well and in good order I am left thinking that this is not a church. A church that does a good evensong or makes a nice broadcast is not bad but it is not complete. And when we think about what Jesus says today this might be a better way of thinking about it. Hypocrisy is a personal failing that centers on the person whereas incompleteness has its focus on and fulfillment in God. So, while the scribes today should have been nicer to the widows, the problem was that because of their house devouring they were missing parts of God. They may have said snazzy prayers but they were less able to be fully God’s because they were holding back part of themselves from God’s providence. Just as a church that does nice broadcasts is not necessarily a complete church, individuals who do not love God mind, body and spirit are not complete Christians.

Since you have me as a priest you get stuck with a fair amount of analogies from Formula 1 and today will be no exception. Back in the 80’s and 90’s there was an Austrian driver by the name of Gerhard Berger. He was a pretty good driver, twice finishing third in the championship, but he was never great. I heard his race engineer interviewed one time and he explained what the main problem was. He said that Berger always had lots of suggestions about what the car needed but the issue was that most of those suggestions never actually made the car go any faster. That I think is analogous to the problem of focusing on hypocrisy. We can make all sort of suggestions about how not to be a hypocrite but most of those will do nothing towards making us a better Christian because we are focusing on the wrong thing – us. Whereas if we switch the focus away from our personal failings and towards God then we are on an upward path. The goal should be to take the places in our lives that are not in accordance with God’s will and fill them with God’s grace and God’s love. When a race car is not living up to its potential it is because some part of it is not doing what it is supposed to be doing or at least not doing it to its full potential. But the result of one failing part is to slow down the whole car, not just the part that is not working properly. When we have parts in our lives that are not glorifying God, they are slowing us down, all of us so that we are not able to fully run towards God.

We are called to be completely God’s own and to do that we need to work on that which is in us that is not fully God’s. Today when Jesus discusses the scribes he is talking about appearances, he is talking about hypocrisy but ultimately, I think he is talking about focus. Are we focused on the kingdom of God fully or are we just focusing on it in certain places? Do we put on a good Evensong but not actually have a congregation? Are we as Texans say all hat and no cattle? The call for us is that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind this day and forevermore.