Book 7

Sunday October 30, 1977

"THREE REASONS FOR TEARING UP YOUR PLEDGE CARD!"
I Corinthians 16:1-2, II Corinthians 8:1-5, 9:6-8

"On the first day of the week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper."
(I Corinthians 16:2)

Some church members probably imagine that the idea of pledging or putting aside a certain amount regularly for the support of the church is something that the church invented in the 20th century. But that's not so! As soon as the church was organized in the first century, St. Paul and other church leaders had to deal with the problem of raising money for the support of the church. The method used was a very simple one and is the one we still use today. "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper." That's what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth.

In other words, the Bible is saying, "It's the obligation of every church member to give regularly and to give proportionately; to put aside or pledge a certain amount of his or her income for the work of the church." The Bible does not say that we are to give when we feel like it or when we have some money left over after having financed a comfortable way of life.

And this is not all the Bible has to say about our support of the church. In his second letter to the church at Corinth, St. Paul again brings up the subject of pledging money for the church. Not only is each one to give regularly and proportionately, but Paul adds the command--"Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

This morning then, let's take the Bible's guidlines and apply them to ourselves as we prepare to make our pledges for the support of the church for the coming year.* These texts imply that there are at least three reasons for tearing up your pledge card.

1. First, do not give reluctantly, or as another translation puts it, "do not give grudgingly." There's nothing worse than a complaining giver. So this morning if you cannot make your pledge to the church in a spirit of thanksgiving

and joy and with a cheerful attitude, then tear up your pledge card.

Some people have so much trouble being thankful and cheerful. Recently I overheard someone trying to comfort another member of the church who was having a run of bad luck. "Surely you can find something for which to be thankful," the one was saying to the other. "How can you say that?" the other asked, "What have I got to be thankful for. Why I can't even pay my bills!" "Be thankful then," his friend replied, "That you aren't one of your creditors."

A thankful person gives cheerfully. A stingy person gives grudgingly.

In fact the Bible says the truly thankful person wants to give. It's part of his or her nature. As an example of this, St. Paul told the church members in Corinth about the Christians in Macedonia. Listen! "We want you to know about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality of their part."

What is a severe test of affliction? From what the pollsters reveal about the deep concern of Americans over inflation and high taxes, a visitor from another planet might conclude that most Americans do not have enough food to eat or clothes to wear. Certainly many of us feel that we are pressed financially. We are making more money that we did eight years ago and yet our buying power has not improved.

Yet can we seriously complain, most of us, about a severe test of affliction? Have you met any of our members who do not have enough food to eat or clothes to wear? Have you noticed very many people driving fewer miles because the price of gasoline has almost doubled? Do you know of anyone who has quit smoking because he or she couldn't afford it?

Yet there are those who when ask to pledge to the church or increase their pledge do so in a grudging complaining fashion as if their whole budget were going to be wrecked because of their giving. It got so bad in one church I heard about that when the preacher literally passed the hat because there were no offering plates, there was nothing in the hat when he got it back. "O Lord," he prayed aloud, "I'm thankful to get my hat back from this congregation.

Can you imagine those Macedonian Christians that Pauls talks about? They gave according to their means and beyond their means. And they gave cheerfully with thanksgiving.

Incredible! No brochures, no budgets! And even more incredible, Paul says, "They begged us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the financial campaign." Can you believe it? People calling the church office asking for the favor of giving money for the support of the church!

These Christians were giving in a spirit of thanksgiving, not grudgingly, but cheerfully. So if you can't make your pledge this morning with thankfulness and cheerfulness, then when the pledge card comes to you, tear it up and throw the pieces in the air. At least you'll be adding to the festivity of the service.

2. Secondly, tear up your pledge card if you think the church and this church in particular is an unnecessary institution. Or if you think of the church as just another one of the charities you support, then tear up the card. The church is not charity. It is the people of God, the body of Christ, and you are a member of it.

That's the reason the Macedonian Christians gave joyfully beyond their means. "First of all,"Paul said, "they gave themselves to the Lord." Their top priority was the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their lives and this included their money. They knew that nothing in the world was more important than the Church of Jesus Christ.

Now the church doesn't always seem so important because we are primarily in the prevention business. Our work is not always sensational and in the news. Prevention is never as sensational as crisis. We're working every day in building lives that are healthy and which make a contribution to society.

We've all heard the story of the town which lay at the bottom of a high cliff. People kept falling off the cliff and getting hurt. The big debate in the town was whether to build a fence at the top of the cliff or buy an ambulance to take the injured to the hospital. Buying an ambulance is much more sensational, sirens blaring, the race between life and death. But building a fence is quiet patient work.

But if you think the church and what it's doing is not important, then tear up your pledge card and go spend that money somewhere else.

Or if you think this congregation should just limp along in a mediocre fashion, then by all means tear up your pledge card. We can probably limp without your help, but we cannot walk and run without your help. At least be honest about your pledge, just as the chairman of one pulpit committee was about the kind of minister he wanted. He said, "We don't want someone who's either too liberal or too conservative. We just want someone who's mediocre."

3. This leads to the third reason for tearing up your pledge card. Tear up your pledge card if you are not giving enough, but then make out a new one which records what you should be giving. A lot of pledge cards should be torn up this morning. (continue on top p. 5)

I'm constantly amazed at persons who are members of clubs, country clubs, dance clubs, dining clubs, whatever. When the dues are raised, they pay it. But how much more difficult it is to get members to raise their church giving. We have many members who have stayed at the same level of giving for the past five years, and these are not persons who are retired and on a fixed income.

Since their pledges have remained the same, this means that these persons have actually cut their giving for the support of the church by a significant amount. As you read in our church paper this past week, if you gave $500 in 1967, and again $500 in 1977, it is now worth $278.40, which means you have cut your pledge in that period by $221.60.

Or look at this ~~here's a different~~ example of how our values are often out of balance. Here's a family with two children, average income $14,000 annually. Their giving to the church is $104 per year, $2 per week. They've been giving the same amount to the church for the past 3 years, even though their annual income has gone up during those years. Both husband and wife smoke an average of one pack of cigarettes per day, costing them about $1.00 per day or $7 per week. Yet they would feel insulted if one talked to them about increasing their giving to the church. But now they are spending $2 a week for health and $7 a week for disease. Unbelievable!

What we forget is that there are equations as true in the moral and spiritual world as in the field of mathematics. That's why Paul said to the church in Corinth, when talking about giving money to the church, "The point is this, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."

We know this is true in farming, but we forget it is true in others areas of life as well. A sparing harvest is yielded to those who give sparingly of themselves. There are many people who in their personal relations have all the warmth of a finely dressed mannequin in a clothing store. Perversely you want to stick them with a pin to see if they will bleed or even jump. Harriet Beecher Stowe once wrote that she had been to a party where everyone seemed to have left himself at home.

What is true in our sowing the seeds of personal relationships is also true of the way in which we use and give our money. Those who are stingy with their giving will reap a scimpy harvest. A true picture of the life reduced to a firm clutch on the coins is that lava-encrusted body taken from the ruins of Pompeii, a man holding grimly to a bag of coins. He had a firm grasp of the coins and was dead. So the spirit becomes petrified when life is lived sparingly.

This morning as you make out your pledge card, if your first impulse is to be a stingy crabby complaining giver, it means your giving is too little, so tear up that pledge card and take another one. Then begin to give until you feel better. The cheerful giver is the one who is giving enough or even more than enough. Are you really afraid that if you let go, you'll give too much? I want to hear trumpets!

Recently while driving through town, I noticed a bumper sticker which I had not seen before. It said, "IF YOU LOVE JESUS, TITHE -- ANYBODY CAN HONK!" There's a lot of truth in that. Anybody can thoughtlessly or anxiously come to stewardship time in a church and make a pledge that is neither beyond one's means, nor within one's means, but in fact is way below one's means. And that is probably the case with many, if not most, church pledgers in our comfortable culture. But how about this year rising above the mediocre "anybody" pledge by first giving yourself to the Lord, and letting him free you to making a significant pledge. Remember anybody can honk!

That's the end of the sermon, now for some instructions.

I'm going to ask that the ushers now begin distributing pledge cards among you.

As you make your pledge you might consider "zero-based giving." Perhaps you've heard of zero-based budgeting. Begin by asking what your pledge would look like if you gave one dollar a week for each $1000 a year annual income. A 15 thousand dollar a year income would mean a $15 a week pledge. Begin your thinking with that at least.

Total commitment is always a problem for some. A chicken and a pig attended a church meeting. The need for funds was dramatically presented and both were moved to respond to the need.

The pig said to the chicken, "Why don't we have a breakfast ro raise money for the church?" "Good idea," said the chicken, "Let's serve ham and eggs."

"Ham and eggs," exploded the pig. "For you that is a token donation; for me it is total commitment!"

Note on the pledge card that you can designate your pledge if you desire. Note also the line on the card which says--

Persons listening on radio can give!
If you are thankful for the radio service,
send money.