

**“How Much Is a Clear Conscience, a Joyful Heart,
a Lifetime of Blessing, and an Eternal Home in
Heaven Worth to You ...per Week?”**

Text: “What shall I render to the Lord for all his bounty to
me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the
name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the
presence of all his people.” Psalm 116:12-14

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One day, not so long ago, money died a sudden death. I am not referring to the recent collapse of our financial institutions across. That is scary enough. But I am speaking of an actual day when money died and became as worthless as the paper it was printed on. Let me tell you about it.

It happened to a friend of mine, in his own country, which at the time was the Republic of South Vietnam. He now is an American. His old country is now The Socialist Republic of Vietnam. His name is Thong Vu. In a land where the Buddhists held a majority and several other religions marched along, Thong and his family were good Christians. They got up each morning to the sound of their alarm clock, they brushed their teeth, washed and dressed, ate breakfast, kissed goodbye, and Thong went downtown to a very good job. They said grace at meals, prayed for their children, saved what they could, yearned for peace, complained about the cost of living, went to church each Sunday – just like we do. They had a nice house, a good car, and just about anything they wanted.

Their daily routines, however as time would have it, were overshadowed by a menacing civil war which raged between them and the people in the northern part of their country. The pain and stress of war had tore families apart: brothers fought against brothers, a tension which would have been familiar in the United States a century and a half ago. Then, when the American troops, which had been sent over to help the freedom-loving South were forced to leave, Thong Vu and his people were in grave and imminent danger. And they knew it. As the Ho Chi Minh Offensive came swooping down the Trail almost unimpeded, he decided to whisk his family out of the country before the whole nation was driven out into the sea, as not too long after, it was.

They had to decide which items to take because sneaking out on foot; they could not carry very much. The children had to leave almost everything they loved behind. Thong

Vu sold almost everything he had and converted all his holdings into cash, literally. Great idea: make it all portable. He stuffed his suitcases with large denomination bills and carried them himself for safe keeping. Miraculously, they crossed the Gulf of Thailand, found refuge in a United Nations Refugee Camp, and eventually made it to Los Angeles then on to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Thong still had his money.

Back then, our congregation was deeply involved with refugee families from SE Asia. We adopted families and provided homes, food, clothing, and jobs. We tried to make the city of Iron and Steel feel like home; but as you know it is cold up there, and the Vu's hometown of Saigon was tropical and warm. They were deeply appreciative of what we did, but within a few years, the family out to Southern California to join the large Vietnamese community, which still is there.

Thong told me that on the journey he had to fight several times to protect his money. He was frantic one day when he could not find it, only to discover that his wife had hidden the suitcases from unknown robbers. He lugged it across fields, hugged it through the marsh, tied it to the top of the raft, heaved it into the Freighter teeming with refugees, and slept lightly on it during the long crossing to America. He had so much money that he was ready for anything, including a comfortable retirement.

But then, you are ahead of me, aren't you? When the Viet Cong conquered the South and plundered Saigon, just as Thong Vu knew they would, they changed everything, even renamed the Capital "Ho Chi Minh City," after their notorious leader. And, you guessed it didn't you? One of the first things the Viet Cong did when they took over was change the currency. They declared the South Vietnamese paper money, the Dong and Piastres, to be worthless! What a horror for Thong Vu! Money, as he had known it and carried it around in his suitcases for 18 months, was dead and gone, over and out! He was crushed, of course. His 100,000 South Vietnamese Dong Government-

Guaranteed Banknotes were not worth a single farthing or a Tinker's Dam! In fact, one Sunday for our Children's sermon at Southminster, Thong Vu and I gave each child a 100,000 Dong banknote as a souvenir. Just two years before, the "money" we gave to the 42 children present, would have been enough to buy a brand new house with cash, plus a new car for the garage. Oh dearie me.

A day when money died. I hear an echo of our Lord Jesus Christ saying to the people of his day, "Be careful: Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not corrupt and thieves cannot break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6: 20) Lay it up there where your investment will never lose its value and die.

Perish the thought, but what if it happened here? It seems unlikely, but not so far fetched as it would have sounded a year ago. But, suppose the value of the American greenback dropped through the cellar, and all of our precious dollars suddenly became worthless.

Let me ask you, "What would you have left, if all your money died?" What if everything you have was taken from you? What on earth would you do? I don't know your answer, but let me share a few that give me some strength and comfort. The first thing that comes to mind is that I still would have a lot of things which money cannot buy. Those I love would still be with me. My family and friends have not stayed with me all these years because I had a lot of money. The heart and hopes and soul of all we are and long to be would remain untouched. The good things you have done would still be preserved forever in indelible ink. The kindnesses you have given and received

would still be circling your days and decades. The forgiveness we received in Christ would still be paid in full by his death and resurrection. The Cross on Calvary would still be empty. The love of God, unchanged as it endures forever, would still rise up to wrap its loving arms around you. Your faithfulness to Jesus Christ would still be recorded in the book of life. All you have done to help those you love and all the others whose lives are richer because you lived, they would still be in the storehouse to your everlasting credit. Like the little woman told me, “I want to live so that someone will miss me when I am gone.

I would never miss my money. I have pastored people of enormous wealth for Fifty years. And the funny thing about it is for the most part, they are just like you and me. Oh sometimes their houses and cars and clothes might cost a little more, although Warren Buffet’s didn’t. The wealthiest man in the world lives in his modest little home. But they get up each morning and go to bed each night. They try to fill the hours in between with some worthwhile things to do. They worry for their children. They love their families. Their range of personal problems is just as broad and puzzling as all the others in God’s world. I have never envied money; but now and then I envy the privilege it would be to use great wealth for good, as so many have and do.

If I lost all my money, I would miss being able to take care of my wife and children and grandchildren and sharing what I have with the Kingdom of God and with all the precious causes seeking help today. My father emphasized to me that it was a rare and precious privilege to be called upon to give to Jesus Christ. Most people in the world are called upon to beg. We are called upon to give. While others seek our mercy; we are here to give it. It is a privilege, not a duty.

The quality of mercy is not strain’d,

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself;

(Portia, The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare)

That's what Jesus meant when he said: "To whom much is given, much will be expected." (Luke 12: 48)

It is that time of year when our Stewardship Committee, under the able leadership of Rich Barfoot, ask for our pledges to allow Sharon Church to plant some seeds of love for another year. We need to plan the budget and try to estimate what the church will need in 2009 for Christ's work here on this campus, and in our outreach to those in need.

Now I know how edgy this past year has been for many of you in matters of finance. Some have lost their jobs; some have seen their reserves dwindle; some are on fixed retirement incomes, one man told me he lost 90% percent of his pension reserves. The rise of inflation has added burdens to every budget. Not one of us knows what could happen in the coming year. It probably cannot get much worse, but the unknown is a fearsome commodity to deal with. I do not want to make you feel guilty by asking you to raise your pledge. God does not ask you to give more than you are able.

I saw a cartoon the other day in which an employee was standing before his boss, obviously having asked for a raise. He is replying to his boss: "Oh sure I am thankful for the roof over my head, and food on the table and the clothes on my back. But I

would be much more thankful if I could afford to pay for some of it!” I don’t know whether he got the raise or not.

Through the years many sincere Christian people have asked me how much they should give to Jesus Christ and his Church. I do not mean to tamper with what you give; that is a personal decision between you and the Lord. But since some ask: the traditional Biblical answer is that we should give a 10% tithe of income. That seems excessive for some, but it should be the goal for all Christians. Peggy and I have always tithed a minimum 10% of our gross income for decades. The Lord has been so good to us, I would be afraid to stop tithing now. Sometimes people ask me whether the 10% should be of the gross income or of the net. I always answer, “That is up to you. Make it on the gross income if you like, or on the net income after taxes. Do whichever makes you happier; for God still loves a cheerful giver! “The point is this;” (St. Paul is speaking to the Corinthians) “they who sow sparingly will also reap sparingly, but they who sow bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (II Cor. 9:6-7) Then he adds, “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity which will produce thanksgiving to the Lord.” (II Cor 9:11)

I recommend a percentage gift. If you cannot manage 10%, then start where you are and move up a percentage point each year. Start at 2% or 3 or 5%. It protects you when things are not going well. If your income drops, so does the total of your percentage gift. Then when things turn rosy again, your percentage gift takes your contribution up with your good fortune. It seems very sensible, to me. If your income falls when you retire, you can rightly lower your gifts to the church.

If you do not feel led to think in percentages, try to find some other way to make it fair to you and to The Lord. The question in our sermon title is the one I use to keep me

balanced. “How much is a clear conscience, a joyful heart, a lifetime of blessing, and an eternal home in heaven worth to you...per week. Of course it is worth all I have and more. Sharon’s pledge card asks for a total pledge for the year. That is fine, I guess, but I prefer to break it down to how much we give per week. If your yearly pledge is \$250 annually, it looks good, but it breaks down to only \$5 dollars per week, or less than a dollar per day.

The Bible tells us to put aside something each week for the Lord. Balance your intended gift with what your life and faith are worth each passing week. In the old days, before we got sophisticated in the variety of our giving opportunities, people brought their donations to the Lord each Sunday and put it in the plate. I shall never forget the little woman in one of my former parishes who fell one day and broke her hip. With one complication and infection and broken seal after another she did not get back to church for over two years. We visited her and called now and then to make sure she was improving.

Finally one Sunday morning her niece wheeled her up to the church and down the aisle to her old pew. When the usher came with the offering tray, she dropped 111 weekly envelopes into the plate, almost one at a time, with two dollars in each one, which was her pledge. Every Sunday that she could not come to Worship, she still filled her envelopes and stacked them up until the day when she would be able to deliver them in person. Our Financial Secretary complained that it was a lot of work to get \$222 dollars. He asked me why she could not have written a check for the whole amount. I replied politely that I thought it was very special and that as a matter of fact, she was obeying a command in the Bible.

If you do not like percentages, you might want to balance your pledge to Christ against the other expenses of your life. Old Dr. Luccock once wrote of what he called “check

stub gossip.” He said that our check book stubs, or now a print out of our monthly on-line summary, will tell you in an instant what your priorities are. Just look at the check-book, or your monthly statement. When my parents died we had to go through all their things, and clean out the house -an enormous and emotional burden in itself. One thing I noticed in my father’s check each month was that his first check each month was written to the Church. He called it “paying his dues.” He was not wealthy. But before he did anything else, before the mortgage and the groceries and his attempt to save, he took care of his Tithe to the Lord.

If you do not like a measured percentage gift then you can weigh your pledge against what you spend on your entertainment: like the meals you eat out at restaurants, or the price of a Panther football ticket. I attend Panther games and it is getting so expensive. Surely your commitment to a football game is not worth more than your commitment to your Church.

One Christmas Eve, years ago when the Miami Dolphins were the rage of NFL Football, they scheduled, for the first time, a play-off game on Christmas Eve. They charged 67 dollars, back then, for a single seat. (It now is 6 times that for a Super bowl game ticket.) My friend Chris Ludder, then pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church had tickets printed up for seats in the Church on Christmas Eve, “Admit One, Christ the King Church, Christmas Eve 68 dollars each. Some of his old fashioned members complained, but he told the reporters who came to cover the Service that it was worth at least as much to come to witness the birth of Jesus Christ as it was to watch the Dolphins play a football Game. He sold it out, by the way.

Or match it against your leisure and sporting activities. Or compare it to your dues at the club, if you belong to one. Or what you drink, if you drink. I have a friend in Scotland who drinks a fine malt whisky at \$52 American dollars a bottle. Each Friday

he buys another one. He also drinks wine with his lunch and dinner. I have not spoken with our Treasurer, but my hunch is that if every member gave to the Lord, what Ian doles out to the Aikman and Terrace Spirits Shop on Bell Street in St. Andrews, the budget would overflow with joy. I jest. But only to say that use some measure against your other expenditures to which you might want to tag your Pledge.

I chose this Psalm 116 for our Biblical text this morning. It is a personal story. David is thanking God for all his blessings through the years. More especially, he has come up the Temple to pay off on a vow he made when he was deathly ill; when the snares of death encompassed him, and the pangs of hell had hold of him, he struck a bargain with the Lord: “If you heal me, I promise to be supremely generous with the Temple budget this year, and I vow to be a far better person in all my dealings. God healed the man, and the Lord also heard his vow.

So he begins verse 1, “I love the Lord because he has heard my supplications and he has healed me.” Then he asks himself: “What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?” Good question. How much do I owe the Lord? The answer is of course, “Everything I have. It all belongs to him.” The Psalmist says it with a little more holiness: “I will lift up the cup of my salvation and call upon the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all the people.” (Did you hear that?) I will pay my vows in the presence of the people. That means in the Church. When I think of all that God has given me and for those I love and for the Churches I have served and for our freedom in this land and for the memory of those I loved and lost awhile, the question jumps into the pupil of my eye: what shall I give back to the Lord for all he has done for me? The answer is up to you: whatever you decide, whatever makes you happy, whatever gives you proper balance.

I mentioned my Dad who kept the books for our family. But after he died, my mother had to take over and as it turned out, she was far more generous than my Scotch Irish Father could ever be, even though he always did his part for the Lord. One day when I was up home; we lived in Florida by then, I took Mother down to the beauty shop to get her hair done. It wasn't that expensive down on Penn Avenue.

When she came out I asked her if she had enough money. "Oh yes," she replied and with a twinkle added: "and I gave her a \$5 dollar tip. This was years ago when a dollar would have been the norm. I told her that she was extravagant and that she would have to watch her money, for it would have to last a long time. It didn't sadly; for she died unexpectedly not long after.

But when I said she was too generous: "Oh probably so Richard, but it makes you feel so good to be generous." It makes you feel so good to give what you have away. John Bunyan added: There was a man. Though some did call him mad. The more he gave away; The more he really had!" Right on John!

"For giving is living", the angel said.

Go feed the hungry and offer them bread!

And must I keep on giving again and again?

My selfish responses all ran.

"Oh No," said the angel, piercing me through,

"Just give 'til the Master stops giving to you!"

The needs are urgent. So is our need to give. Give as much as you are able, for now and forever more. Amen

