

The Power of a Personal Commitment
Romans 12:1-8

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While my farmer father only had a fourth grade education, he was a wonderful story teller. One of his favorite yarns was about a chicken and a pig who encountered a hungry man beside the road. Moved with compassion, the chicken said to the pig, "Why don't you and I go together and give this man a great ham and eggs breakfast?" The pig pondered the proposition for a moment and then replied, "For you that would be a contribution; but for me that would mean total commitment."

On this Sunday when we are asked to declare our prayers, presence, gifts, and service to the work of God through this great congregation, I want to chat with you about the power of a personal commitment. Paul put it this way: *"I appeal to you brothers and sisters by the mercies of God that you present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may discern the will of God—what is good, acceptable and perfect."*

WILL YOU MAKE A PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO PRAY? 'It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.' I am here today as a result of your prayers and I hope to be here tomorrow, through the power of your continued prayers. No person can reach their full spiritual potential without the power of prayer. Great leaders of the Bible were people of prayer. Abraham prayed for Sodom. Moses prayed for the children of Israel. Joshua prayed for guidance. Hannah prayed for a child. Solomon prayed for wisdom. Joseph prayed for understanding. Peter prayed for vision. We cannot do what we are called to do unless we are people of prayer.

We need to pray for one another because in the dark night of the soul it's really hard to pray for yourself. So let our prayers for each other abound through intercessions and e-mails and every means available to us. We must first and foremost be a people who pray for one another. That's my prayer today.

Let us pray for this church. I thank God every day for the privilege of being here. If church were a business, we could do more planning. If church were a club, we could have more parties. But the church is of God and will only be preserved to the end of time by the prayers of people lifted on her behalf.

It took a miracle for this church to march down Franklin Road to a new home in 1972. It took a miracle for this church to step out and faith and build one of the most beautiful modern sanctuaries in America. It took a miracle to make these last steps of building expansion and renovation without additional indebtedness. Nothing would please the devil more than to have us stumble now. Let us never desert to our foes. Instead, let us humble ourselves in the eyes of the Lord; seek his wisdom; follow his will. First and foremost, let us be a people of prayer.

WILL YOU MAKE A PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO BE PRESENT?

One of my favorite church members of all time was a little short, retired telegraph operator who wore thick glasses in one of the congregations I served back in the late 1970's and early 1980's by the name of Charlie Hitt. He couldn't hear and he couldn't see. He didn't own a car so he hitch hiked to church. He sat on the front row and sang about two measures behind the rest of the congregation. Somebody asked Charlie one day— "Why do you bother to come to church? You can't, see or hear and you have to hitch hike to come to church. Why do you bother to come?" With a twinkle in his eye, Charlie replied, "Come Sunday, I want my neighbors to know whose side I'm on."

A commitment of presence creates an island in certainty, in the swirling waters of change. We need to know that people who promise to be with us are really going to be with us. Families, churches, countries depend on such accords. We are not butterflies fluttering here and there in search of the latest nectar. We are human beings capable of making promises and keeping them. That is hard; it is tough. Never has your time been more pressured than it is now.

I remember how that principle was severely tested in our own household several years ago. When our boys were young, we were fortunate to be in churches that had vibrant ministries for teenagers including choirs, sports, and youth groups. Our younger son, Brad, was also an avid football player. One spring Brad discovered that U.K. football camp happened to be the same week as summer youth choir tour. The double booking resulted in family conflict and a final showdown in which I said, "We keep the commitments we make in this family," which meant he went on the choir tour. I'm sure his leaders would have preferred he stay home as he was less than enthusiastic about singing. But years later as we sat around the dinner table reminiscing about the things that made us what we are, Brad our reliable, dependable, steady, focused physician said, "Dad, do you remember that time you made me go to choir tour because I had made a promise? That taught me a lesson I will never forget. People need to keep their promises."

We have made a commitment in this congregation to multiple, principle worship services. Just as grocery stores offer an ever-widening variety of food, so churches need to become open minded to varieties of ways to worship God. It's a matter of taste, not a matter of truth. Frankly, we are way behind the curve among large mainline churches on this matter. Here is where we are headed.

1. 8:30 and 10:55 worship services will remain essentially unchanged.
2. Saturday night worship needs another fifty people and a solid music component to move it to the next level.
3. The Monday night Loop is an exciting worship service for young singles in this community. It has not come to pass. It has come to stay. It deserves our prayers, our space, our encouragement, and our financial support.
4. Pending the approval of the Church Council in a few weeks, we will launch a new Sunday Morning Worship experience called the Awakening in the spring of 2005. Missionaries are needed for this new service, targeted primarily to the unchurched. Maybe you would like to help.
5. Sunday school classes and Bible study groups give us places to know and to be known. They are essential to our discipleship development.
6. Our presence is one of our finest gifts. Let us know that you plan to be here.

I ask you today, will you make a commitment of your presence? Will you be in church every Sunday unless you are ill or out-of-town? Will you become a missionary with us so that we can reach a whole new world of people? For the sake of Christ, God needs you today.

WILL YOU MAKE A COMMITMENT TO GIVE?

Martin Luther once observed, there are three conversions necessary in every life. They include the conversion of the heart, the mind, and the pocketbook. I think he is right. There are distinct conversions that happen to us in our lives.

In a B.C. cartoon one prehistoric character asks the other, "How much should I give to charity?" His friend replies, "I don't know, give until it hurts." With that the guy tosses a couple of coins into the basket which causes his friend to comment, "Man you have a low threshold for pain." Please understand, I'm not knocking small gifts. Jesus said, "*There is power in the widow's mite,*" and I've found that true through the years. We are not called to give till it hurts. We must give until it feels good. There is a difference between a tip and a tithe.

I meet with a group of men on Wednesday mornings who keep me honest and humble. After the sermon I preached last Sunday about becoming accountable with our financial resources, one of them said to me, "Howard, why don't you tell us how you really feel about giving?" In case you missed it, here is how I feel. Tithing creates a level playing field for all of us and should be the standard for all disciples. It means that some of us should move way beyond the tithe and begin handling all our resources in the light of God's goodness to us. It means that others of us need to start somewhere—one percent, two percent, four percent, and make a conscious effort to move forward each year. Start somewhere in proportionate giving. The church does not need your gifts nearly as badly as you need the discipline of giving.

Write it down. Why? "This is between God and me," we say. Not necessarily. All covenants need to be ratified and call for witnesses. Writing it down helps me. I

am not making a pledge or entering a prison or establishing a mortgage. I am forecasting an estimate, making a projection, setting a direction, God being my helper, and the future is sound.

Writing it down will not only help you, but it helps the church. The last thing I ever want to do in the church is hound people for money. By matching your estimates with the projected needs and ministries, we can practice good stewardship in the church. I can tell you that we need ten to twelve percent increase in the General Fund ministries for next year. I can tell you that one way to do that is transfer some of your completed Fulfill the Vision Pledge to the General Fund. If some of you want to talk, I will be more than happy to do that. It is not raising budgets; it is being faithful to God. Until God has gotten to our pocketbooks, he hasn't gotten to us.

WILL YOU MAKE A COMMITMENT TO SERVE?

In Christ we who are many form one Body. We have different gifts according to the grace given to us. Prophesying—according to his faith, serving—let him serve, teaching—let him teach, encouraging—let him encourage, contributing to the needs of others—let him give generously, if it is leadership—let him govern diligently, showing mercy—do it cheerfully. It is in the diversity of gifts that makes us one.

Nobody has asked me to sing in the choir in all of my years of ministry. I am not hurt about that because they know more about that than I do. But, some of you need to join the choir. A young man sat in my office a few weeks ago who was getting ready to join the church and we were talking about serving and he said, "I want to be a parking attendant." A couple of Sundays ago as he departed the church, he shook my hand and said "I'm sorry I missed your sermon, I've been out parking cars." We need ushers, greeters, musicians. Andrew Ministers, Stephen Ministers are critical to this church.

All must tune our hearts to the cry of the needy. Many of America's children are already left behind. They are at home alone to raise themselves on a thin and cruel diet of junk food, violent music, and trash television. Join hands to save the children here and around the world. I was pondering all of this the other day and the Lord got a hold of me. I don't like it when I have to practice my own preaching. He said to me, "Howard, do you remember when you used to stand in the public square and defend the cause for the homeless?" I said, "Yes, I remember dealing with city governments, public opinion and all the rest." The Lord said to me, "Why are you just satisfied now sending them money?" I started wondering—am I going to still hear the cry of the needy? I need to change that.

I am only one, but still I am one.

I cannot do everything, but still I can do something.

And because I cannot do everything

I will not refuse to do the something I can do.

Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling. Will we rise up and follow?

