

Cast Your Seed upon the Waters

Ecclesiastes 11:1-2; Luke 6:38

April 20, 2007

Rev. Greg L. Price

As Christians, we are not only to care for the needs of those within our own immediate family, but we are likewise to look beyond our own family and to seek to help those outside our family as God gives us the opportunity. It is true that we are worse than an infidel if we don't provide for the needs of our own family (as the Holy Spirit teaches in 1 Timothy 5:8), but we are also to seek God's grace that we might have a heart to give cheerfully to the needs of those who are even outside the household of faith, knowing how merciful God has been to us in freely and abundantly pouring out His blessings upon such undeserving sinners like you and me (Galatians 6:10). The Lord Jesus not only commands that we give, but also promises that God will send blessings upon us as we do so (Luke 6:38). Christ teaches us in the New Testament what the Holy Spirit (speaking through Solomon) teaches us in the Old Testament from our text in Ecclesiastes 11:1-2.

Dear ones, there were three great duties that Israel rightly understood they should perform to God and to others, which are summarized by our Lord in Matthew 6: (1) the giving of alms to the poor and needy (Matthew 6:1-4); (2) the offering of prayer unto the Lord (Matthew 6:5-15); and (3) the humbling of oneself before God by way of fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). Christ does not in any way deny that alms, prayer, and fasting are duties; nor does He minimize these duties in the least. However, the Lord does make it clear that none of these duties are to be performed merely before men in order to be seen by others in order to receive the applause of men. To the contrary, these are duties we perform primarily before God as expressions of thankful hearts for the grace and mercy God has freely bestowed upon unworthy sinners. Dear ones, you can't save your own souls by giving all that you have to help others. Giving (even when done sacrificially) of your time, treasure, and talents, cannot pay the infinite debt you owe to God for your sin. No amount of prayers, fasting, or giving is meritorious before God in pardoning sin or in acquiring righteousness that will pass the infinitely holy bar of God's judgment. It is only what Christ has given that God will receive as sufficient payment for your sin. It is only Christ's obedience, Christ's death, Christ's righteousness that is meritorious for sinners. You can only receive by faith alone from Christ what He has given for your salvation. Dear ones, do not fall into the trap of thinking that you give to others in order that you might receive everlasting life from God or receive the forgiveness of all your sin. That, my friend, is simply a salvation based upon your own work, which is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is true that God does promise a reward (as we shall see) to those who give of themselves and of their resources to help those in need. However, God in blessing you with such a reward does not give you what you deserve, but graciously gives you what you do not deserve: namely, a reward when you cheerfully and humbly obey Him. How amazing is our God. He first gives you the grace to believe in Him, to desire to obey Him, and to give to the help of others. And then He graciously and freely rewards you when you do so. Praise be to our God and His gracious work within us.

Let us, dear ones, consider the following two main points from our text: (1) Give and It Shall Be Given unto You (Ecclesiastes 11:1); and (2) Give While You Yet Have the Opportunity (Ecclesiastes 11:2).

I. Give and It Shall Be Given unto You (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

A. In the previous chapter (Ecclesiastes 10), we heard the inspired and repentant Preacher, Solomon, give to those who lawfully rule and to those who are lawfully ruled wise instructions in being

submissive to God—all with a view to enjoying Christ in this life (regardless of your circumstances in life).

B. In the section now before us, there is a shift from the context of rule and authority to the context of mutual service to your fellow man. As the Apostle John reminds us (in 1 John 4:20), if we do not love our brother or neighbor whom we can see, how can we love God whom we cannot see? Thus, dear ones, to love your neighbor or to serve your neighbor or to give to your needy neighbor is not disconnected from your duty to serve and to love God. In fact, according to the Holy Spirit, there is a direct relationship between the two. You do not love God if you do not love your neighbor. Thus, as you hear the Word of the Lord today, do not excuse yourself by saying, “I may not love, serve, or give to my brother or neighbor, but I do love and serve the Lord.” That cannot be, says the Apostle John!

C. Solomon first addresses your duty to give in helping those in need. The Holy Spirit speaking through Solomon commands us: “Cast thy bread upon the waters” (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

1. This is not an option or a mere suggestion, but is rather a commanded duty.

2. This giving of which Solomon here speaks is not a natural disposition, but is rather a supernatural grace that flows from the love of God that has been poured out in your hearts by the Holy Spirit.

3. This giving is a conspicuous evidence and fruit of God’s work of grace in your life. And when you are unwilling to give to others and rather close your ears to the cries of those who have legitimate needs, it exposes unbelief that dwells in your heart. Dear ones, to open your hands and to receive freely and graciously the gift of everlasting life offered to you (who justly deserve everlasting damnation), and then to close your hands and refuse to help those in legitimate need is to betray the gospel which you profess (“Freely ye have received, freely give” Matthew 10:8). It is a contradiction. It is a grievous sin against the Lord of mercy, whom you profess to embrace by faith.

4. To what does Solomon allude in this proverbial speech of casting bread upon the waters?

a. Bread was one of the primary staples of life in the ancient world. In fact, in the Hebrew language, the same Hebrew word (*lechem*) may be translated as “bread” or as “food”. Thus, what is cast or sent upon the waters is that which is necessary to sustain the needs of others. Likewise, Christ teaches us to pray that our own bodily needs might be supplied by our Heavenly Father in these words, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). There we also see that “bread” represents what is needed to sustain life in this world. So the Holy Spirit is not limiting what you cast upon the waters to literal bread any more than Christ is teaching to pray only for literal bread. Thus, to cast your bread upon the waters is to send whatever you can to supply the legitimate needs of others.

b. Notice where the bread is cast—“upon the waters”. Some understand “the waters” to be the seas upon which merchant vessels would take the bread to various places in the world. Others understand “the waters” to be the river that overflowed its banks (as with the Nile), enriching the soil and causing the seed cast into it to bring forth a rich harvest, which was then made into bread. Others simply take the proverbial speech at face value, and understand this to picture one throwing his bread from the shore out into the sea. The last alternative would seem to be what Solomon has in view, because it illustrates a very important principle that is taught in various places in the Scripture. It would appear to one watching you cast your bread out into the sea that you were crazy to waste good food—for you will never see it again. To those who only have the wisdom of this world, it would seem foolish to cast your bread “upon the waters”, for there will be no material return for that bread. It is lost forever. And so, likewise, when you seek to help those who have legitimate needs, you do not give expecting full repayment with interest. Note I said, those with legitimate needs, for you are not responsible to give to those who are lazy, irresponsible, nor to those who will not work. In regard to such persons, the Apostle Paul (through the Holy Spirit) states that if they will not work,

then let them not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Let their hungry belly (i.e. their need) motivate them to stop being selfish and to stop expecting that everyone who works hard owes them a living, owes them a house, owes them food and clothing. Dear ones, you freely give because you have freely received from the Lord, not because by giving you look to become rich in this world. You freely give because there is a real need and because love for your neighbor constrains you (Luke 6:31). Did Jesus teach us to give to those from whom we could expect some financial return in this life, or to give to those from whom we could expect a full repayment? To the contrary, the Lord commanded us to give to those who are so needy that we do not expect they will ever be able to repay us (Luke 6:34). Thus, dear ones, when you see a poor brother or sister who has a real need, go and cast your bread upon the waters as if you will never see that bread again in this life. You are not to make opportunities to show Christian charity a means of personal gain or public applause. If it is a poor brother or sister to whom you lend money for an urgent need, the Scripture teaches us to care more about the urgent need they have than about the material return we shall get. In fact, interest on loans to such poor brethren should not be exacted at all—it should be an interest-free loan (Exodus 22:25). This is not to say that it is always wrong to loan money to fellow Christians and to charge a reasonable rate of interest when they desire a loan (not for an emergency and necessity) but rather for some improvement to their business, property, or estate. For if the borrower expects to make money off such a loan, it is only reasonable that the one who loaned the money should also expect some return on the money that was loaned. This interest he could have received had he left that money in the bank (Matthew 25:27).

5. Let us consider other ways in which you may cast your bread upon the waters, not expecting to become materially rich thereby.

a. Parents, you are to continually cast bread upon the waters by way of giving your children loving instruction, loving protection, loving care, and loving discipline. You are not to cast that bread upon the waters, expecting that you will financially prosper thereby. Rather you give to your children because your children need your love, instruction, protection, care, and discipline (and because God commands you to do so). Your children need most of all the Lord Jesus Christ. You, therefore, cast your bread upon the waters by bringing them to Christ in baptism and teaching them through God's Law that they are sinners and need a Savior and through the gospel that God has sent Christ to be a Savior for all sinners who embrace Him by faith alone. You cast your bread upon the waters by bringing them daily to the Lord in your secret worship, in family worship, and by bringing them weekly to public worship. You cast your bread upon the waters by preparing them to come to the Lord's Supper, by teaching them sound doctrine, and by leading them to Christ by your own example of repentance and forgiveness when you have sinned.

b. Dear ones, you cast your bread upon the waters (not expecting financial gain) when you patiently suffer trials and afflictions to the glory and honor of Christ. When you suffer the mockery of those at work because you have faithfully stood for Christ and His truth, you are casting your bread upon the waters. When you lose a promotion or a job because you will not work on the Christian Sabbath (or Lord's Day), you are casting your bread upon the waters. When you patiently suffer with various physical afflictions to the glory of God (as did Job), you are casting your bread upon the waters. When you are isolated from family and friends due to the fact that you will not compromise what is faithful to the Word of God, you are casting your bread upon the waters. It may look foolish to others that you are willing to suffer the loss of all things for the sake of Christ (and without any material reward in this world), but you are being obedient to Christ, and you are casting your bread upon the waters, looking to Christ to graciously reward you in His time.

c. You cast your bread upon the waters as you provide for the needs of the ministry of a faithful Church of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 9:14). One indicator of your love for Christ and His Word is your regular, cheerful, voluntary, and sacrificial giving in order to see the ministry of God's Word continue to

you and your children. If you do not care whether you have a faithful ministry or not, or if it doesn't bother you that you could lose a faithful ministry or not, you reveal an apathy and lukewarmness to Christ.

D. Solomon now moves from the precept to cast your bread upon the waters to the promise of God that follows: "for thou shalt find it after many days" (Ecclesiastes 11:1). Here the gracious promise of God is joined to the holy precept of God in order to encourage you all the more to obey the Lord. The promise sweetens the precept. The Holy Spirit (speaking through Solomon) states that there is a promise of reward to those who cast their bread upon the waters.

1. How is it that you should look for a reward when you have already seen from the words of Christ that you are not to give in order to receive? The Lord was specifically teaching us to give in such a way that we expect not a return from the brother, sister, or neighbor to whom we have given. Moreover, we are not to give, believing that God owes us (or is indebted to us) for what we have given in casting our bread upon the waters. Everything you receive from the Lord in this life is all of grace, not merit on your part. If God were to be perfectly just with us, we and our children would all be starving, homeless, naked, suffering in agony with every imaginable disease, without family or friends, running every moment for our lives, and hopelessly facing an eternity of far greater agony and torment in hell. God owes us absolutely nothing, but misery in this life and hell for all eternity for our sin. Therefore, when God promises such a reward as is found in Ecclesiastes 11:1, please understand that this promise is due to the mercy and grace of God alone. He did not have to make any such promise at all.

2. The divine promise made here is that you will find the bread you have cast upon the waters to return to you after many days, as the waves of the sea carry that bread back to you. To the world, the bread you cast upon the waters is lost. To the Christian, the bread you cast upon the waters is simply lent to the Lord and sent to another use, but it will return to you in God's own way and in God's own time. It is true that the bread you cast upon the waters may not return to you in the same form of bread in which you gave it. You may cast financial bread upon the waters to the support of the ministry, but what you receive back is far better for you and your children—namely, heavenly bread which you eat by faith in your souls. You may cast your bread upon the waters in meeting the financial need of a poor brother or sister, but the Lord may meet your own needs through someone else or He may give you the grace to be content, even when you lack. You may cast your bread upon the waters in helping those who are sick, and may receive that bread in return by being granted the grace from God to endure your own severe physical afflictions. You cannot stipulate to God how He should return your bread back to you. He is most wise and always returns your bread in the way He sees fit. What is promised here is that the bread will return to you. In what form and at what time it will return to you is entirely up to the Lord.

3. The Lord by this promise encourages you to look not to man to return that bread to you, but rather to look in faith and hope to Christ to return that bread to you in His own way and in His own time. God may use man as an instrument to return that bread to you, but your trust and hope is not in man to fulfill this promise, but is rather in your faithful, wise, and Almighty God, who cannot lie (Luke 6:38; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Hebrews 6:10). Dear ones, that bread may not return for "many days" (Ecclesiastes 11:1), but it will return both in this life and in the life to come in heavenly glory.

II. Give While You Yet Have the Opportunity (Ecclesiastes 11:2).

A. Solomon now commands us not to think our duty to give is done once we have given to one who is in legitimate need, but rather to see that the whole life of a Christian is one of giving: "Give a portion to seven, and also to eight" (Ecclesiastes 11:2). To truly love is to give as Christ gave (Ephesians 5:25). To love God is to give Him your all—to lay everything on the altar (Romans 12:1). To love your neighbor is to give him

what is legitimately needed (whether of your talents, treasures, or time) to the glory of Christ and His Kingdom (Ephesians 4:27). Dear ones, you can either be givers or takers. Do you give to others, or do you drain others? Do you find it more blessed to give than to receive? Giving of yourself sacrificially to others identifies you with Christ, who gave His life for unworthy sinners like you and me.

B. Finally, Solomon tells us that we should not delay our giving at the present time, because we may not have it to give later on, if we wait (“for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth” Ecclesiastes 11:2). Some calamity, some trial may come your way later in preventing you from being able to reach out with help to that brother or sister in legitimate need. In fact, if you make excuses at the present time as to why you cannot give (of your time, treasures, or talents) to someone in legitimate need, God may take away what you presently have altogether, due to your lack of compassion for others.

Copyright 2007 Greg L. Price.