

Sow Bountifully—While You Can

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

Halifax: 9 March 2014

Introduction:

Today we continue our regular sermon series in Ecclesiastes—

- but I must tell you that I was tempted to postpone this message until next week because next week is the week of our congregational meeting...
 - And this message is really well suited to us as we consider our work as a congregation going into the next year.
- Churches go through cycles, times of growth and times of decline—and times of ease and times of difficulty.
 - It was about five or six years ago that we had a time of unprecedented growth as a congregation, but the last couple of years have been a time of stagnation and difficulty.
 - We have had some folks drift away or leave us, we have had a lot of sickness among us, and we have had struggles in our homes and in our work and in our marriages...and we have had very little effective outreach.
 - Sometimes the hard times and the slow times are due to our sin and slackness—and at other times they are simply times of testing that God sends our way.
 - I would have to say that in our situation, we cannot say that we have been blameless.
 - Ten years ago when times were slow, that could be said, but in the last two or three years, I don't think we can claim to be without fault.
- But there are signs of change—among many of us.
 - In the last year or so, some of you have put aside sin in your lives that was holding you (and really all of us) back...
 - some of you have started trusting God more as parents and have addressed yourself to your calling regarding your children...
 - and some of you have started engaging more in service to God...
 - Not all of you—but there has been some improvement over all...
 - I told you that God dealt with me about my lack of diligence in prayer—and the Lord has been helping me—though I am not where I ought to be.
 - I have also been striving to be more focused on my task—to plan my work and work my plan—and I still have progress to make with that too.
 - And also I want to improve in my concern for others—to really care about all of you and how you are doing—to love you all as I should...
 - It is convicting to consider how far short I come in these things...
 - But I have seen some improvement in us as a congregation...

And the passage that is before us today in Ecclesiastes is one that provides great encouragement to us to move forward for the Lord!

- It follows very nicely what we looked at last week—
 - how we often do things that bring trouble and hardship to ourselves and the people around us instead of things that promote blessing...
 - You may remember some of the things—
 - I talked about how we often say ugly, unhelpful things to each other—and why?
 - Every time we throw a verbal punch, all we do is create a nasty atmosphere all around us—
 - I caught myself doing this a couple of times last week and had to ask forgiveness for it.
 - But why do we even do it in the first place?
 - It doesn't even benefit us—or the people around us—it makes no sense at all, but we still do it!
 - So why?
 - The only answer is that we are sinners at the core—we can't blame it on anything else—our hearts are desperately wicked.
 - I spoke about a lot of other things too...
 - Like not preparing ourselves—cutting with a dull ax—going into the day without the Word and prayer and trying to work...it's folly!
 - I spoke to you about labouring with a bad attitude—not putting our heart into our work—but just getting by—living for Friday instead of also living for Monday!
 - I spoke to you about saying ugly things—even in your heart—about people who have authority over you—it is just folly!
- Well today's passage builds on all of this by encouraging us to do that which will bring blessing—
 - Last week was sort of the put off—the things we ought to put off from our lives—
 - And this week is the put on—the things we ought to be doing instead!
 - These verses encourage us to pour ourselves into our service for the LORD and of course that means that we pour ourselves into service for others—ministering to them when we have opportunity!

So let's take a look at our text—

- It is Ecclesiastes 11:1-6.
- Listen carefully as I read it to you. It is the Word of God.

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6: Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. ² Give a serving to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil will be on the earth. ³ If the clouds are full of rain, they empty *themselves* upon the earth; and if a tree falls to the south or the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it shall lie. ⁴ He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not

reap. ⁵ As you do not know what *is* the way of the wind, *or* how the bones *grow* in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything. ⁶ In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike *will be good*.

May the LORD bless to us the reading of His holy Word.

I. You can see that our text begins with a command, or at least a piece of advice—*cast your bread upon the waters!*

A. What does this mean?

1. It sounds like a pretty crazy thing to do—I mean, it would get soggy and everything—so why would anybody do that?
 - Well, in some ways it is supposed to sound a little crazy...
 - Because the Lord is telling us to give even when we can't see how it will ever benefit us or what our gift will accomplish.
2. There are, of course, several different interpretations...
 - a. Most of the older writers simply see it as an admonition to give to others—and I am quite sure they are right about that.
 - b. More recently, some have suggested that it may refer to sowing seed corn on a flood plain as they did in Egypt...
 - The Nile would flood every year and they would actually sow the seed in the shallow waters of the flood and the seed would lodge in the loamy base and then grow fiercely when the waters receded.
 - To those who did not understand, it looked like you throwing away your grain—but in reality you were multiplying it!
 - c. An even more sophisticated interpretation is that this has to do with sending grain across the sea to other lands...
 - You send it out and then you get the return on your investment after many days.
 - Here again, it looks like you are foolishly sending off what is yours, but in truth you are preparing for a great return.
3. I think all of those interpretations are fine—they give interesting pictures—
 - but the first one seems to be the point in any case—
 - that we are to pour our lives out—to give ourselves to others—to do so even when we cannot see what good it will do!
 - Like Jesus said in John 12:24 when He spoke of His coming death,
 - **John 12:24-26: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.”**
 - Everyone thought He was casting away His life when He went to the cross—as though He were casting it into the waters...
 - But in fact He was planting His life to be raised with bumper crop and He calls us to do the same.

- B. There are, of course, a million different applications to this notion of casting our bread on the waters...
1. It means that you pour yourself out in service at home—
 - You are to give yourself fully for the other people in the family.
 - Children, it means that you look for ways to help out—*of course* do your chores without being told—but look for extra things that you can do!
 - And wives, keep on pouring yourself out for the good of your family—look after them—make yourself a blessing to them even if they don't appreciate it.
 - And you men, don't feel entitled to do nothing at home because you were working all day!
 - Show love by going the extra mile.
 - Of course you are tired, but you will get stronger if you don't give in to your tiredness.
 2. Casting your bread on the waters means that you sow the word—even when you don't see what it is accomplishing...
 - Sow it by speaking it into the lives of your children...
 - Sow it by reading it and laying it up in your own heart...and by listening to sermons...
 - Sow it by sharing it with unbelievers—telling them what the Lord has done for you and of their need for the LORD.
 - Sow it by supporting the preaching at the church—pay your tithes and support missions—and invite people to hear the word...
 - Give them sermons to listen to and books and booklets to read...
 - Sow it by encouraging other people in the church with it...
 - Sow it by helping out with web or with promotional stuff for your church...
 3. Casting your bread on the waters means that you send out your prayers...
 - You may not feel that you see them answered—but keep casting your bread on the waters anyway.
 - Pour out prayer for your spouse, for the lost, for your children...
 - Pray earnestly for the church, for her growth, for her peace, for the preaching of the word, for the officers, for purity and faithfulness...
 - Pray for the erring soul...
 - Pray for your neighbours and your country and your city and your leaders.
 - Pray for the people at work...
 4. And when you are at work—casting your bread there means that you...
 - pour yourself out for your employer, for the other workers, for your clients.
 - Go the extra mile for the glory of God, even if people don't seem to appreciate it.

5. And of course casting your bread means that you give of your substance to those who are in need...
 - Look for ways that you can help and do not hesitate—cast it out with both hands!
 - And not just monetary gifts...
 - Visit the sick, visit the bereaved, encourage the discouraged, support the weak, admonish the slackard, stir up the slothful, pursue the wanderer and bring them back,
 - Find ways to serve—assisting others where you can...

TRANS> Cast your bread with zeal!

- Sow abundantly!

C. Verse 2 enforces the point that you are to do this sowing with great gusto!

1. It says, “Give a serving to seven, and also to eight!”

- First of all, notice that it is *a serving*—a full portion—not just a pittance—give a lot...
- And *giving to seven and also to eight*...
 - That is the Hebrew of way of saying give to everyone you can and then do some more!
 - Seven is the number of fullness and completeness...
 - So after you have fulfilled that, go on to the eighth!
 - Don’t get to the point where you say it is enough when there are more hours in the day and when there is more you can do!

TRANS> Of course I am not saying that you should never rest...

2. But I am saying that you should be eager and enthusiastic about doing all that you can.

- Sowing your life should not be something you are reluctant to do, but something you love to do...
 - You know how much energy and strength you find for the things you love to do—
 - I spoke about this last week with something like math...
 - A kid will struggle to do his math, but then he figures out stuff that is way more complicated on his computer game and does it with great finesse...
 - He stays up late figuring it out—and he engages his mind in it fully!
 - His heart is in it.
- So you know what I am talking¹ about here...
 - We need to be motivated like that in our service to others!
 - We need to be like Jesus, and like Paul, the indefatigable apostle!

3. We have an aversion to casting our bread because we don't look at it in the right way—as in investment for the Lord.
 - And the question is, why?
 - We all know that it is a good thing to serve and bless others!
 - We all know that it is good for us and good for them!
 - But there is sin in us—and it makes us loathe to do things for others—especially if we think there won't be a good return...

TRANS> But that brings us to our second point!

II. The LORD tells us that if we will cast our bread on the waters, it will come back to us! We will get a good return!

- Look at all of verse 1:
 - **Ecc 11:1: Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.**
- A. Now you surely know that this is true as a proverb—it is obvious...
 - Most of the time, when you pour out your life for the sake of others—when you really love them and do good to them—blessing results for you and for them...
 - 1. I talked about pouring yourself into loving service in the home—
 - What happens if you really do that?
 - You teens—do you know what happens if you not only do your chores, but go beyond that—looking for ways to do good?
 - You will be entrusted with more and more responsibility and freedom!
 - You will be allowed to use the car because you use it to serve!
 - You will be entrusted with a credit card from your parents.
 - You will have restrictions lifted because you use your time to help others and serve them.
 - And you will make your parents happy with you—and your siblings too!
 - What keeps you from doing this—from serving?
 - Again, it is sin...it is bitterness...it is pride—but it is to your own hurt.
 - Jesus can set you free to serve—Don't you want to be free?
 - And husband, if you give yourself for your wife—
 - Will that make things worse for you—if you pour your life out for her—will that ruin your life?
 - If you give to your children—to bless them—
 - What will the effect be?
 - Fathers, if you invest in your little ones with faithful love, when they get older they will trust you to give them advice...
 - Your sons and daughters will look to you for counsel because they will know that you love them...

- And if you ask them to do something that is hard and undesirable, they will do it for you.
 - Your daughter will want your approval about the person she marries...
 - But if you have not invested love and care over the years, she won't care what you have to say.
2. And what happens if you pour yourself out at work—for others...
- You know what will usually happen...
 - If you have a business, people will start talking about you—all the sacrifices you made will come back to you with requests for more services for you...
 - And if you work for someone else, they will take notice of you and they will advance you—
 - They will want you to take more responsibility, and if they don't notice you, someone else will, and they will want to hire you.
 - And you will be given privileges...
 - And you will simply make people happy with you and they will trust you!
 - It will be as good for you as it is for them!
3. And with sowing the Word...
- Parents, if you sow the Word in your children's life—if you discipline consistently and teach them to seek Christ...
 - If you faithfully direct them in the way of the LORD,
 - Is that not going to bring you many happy returns?
 - And when you sow the Word in your own life...will the effort ever be wasted?
 - Let me tell you—sowing with eagerness makes things much more interesting...
 - If I do Bible study in a perfunctory way—because I know I should—but I don't really get into it—I will be bored...
 - But if I get excited about it—and I think about how the word can fill my life...
 - And how I can apply it and what it means and what God promises to me—
 - and how I can share it with others—and I start looking up words and cross references and commentaries...
 - It is no longer a dull routine—a painful obligation—a chore...
 - It becomes totally interesting and engaging!
4. And the same with your prayers...

- If you are really praying and watching—looking for the Lord’s hand—looking for Him to answer—
 - Your prayer life will be interesting and rewarding—not just a stupid empty exercise that you put up with out of guilt!

TRANS> You know that all this is true—so what keeps you from casting your bread on the waters?

- Just one thing keeps you from it! Sin!
 - You are so sinful that you sin even though it deprives you of blessing.
- But you know that it is true as a proverb—that when you pour out your life, it is way better both for you and the people around you—usually that is what you see...It is proverbially true...

B. But I also want you to know that it is a promise!

- Not only is it generally true that you reap what you sow—but in fact it is always true!
 1. There are times, as Solomon is the first to point out in Ecclesiastes, when you give and there is no seeming return...
 - You pray, and there is no answer to your prayer...
 - You witness to a lot of people and they all reject the gospel...
 - You serve at work and at home, and nobody seems to appreciate it—maybe they even criticize you and oppose you for it!
 - That can be very discouraging!
 2. But the LORD says that the return will come after many days!
 - That is a promise from Him! A promise you can count on!
 - He tells us that we will reap what we sow—it is a sure thing!
 - He will never forget to reward His servants!
 - But it may not be for many days!
 - It may not be until after you are gone from this world—
 - But what is wrong with that?
 - Jesus repeatedly encouraged us with the promise, “Great is your reward in heaven!”
 - Even if you pour yourself out in sowing the word and they throw you in prison to rot—
 - or they beat you or kill you...
 - You won’t lose a thing—your reward will be great in heaven!
 - Augustine said, let them take from my name—they only increase my reward!
 - The same can be said of your estate—let them take from my estate—they only increase my reward in heaven.

3. You need to believe this promise when it starts to get hard!
 - You have been casting all you have on the waters and you can see no return...
 - That is not the time to give up—that is the time to believe the promises and the faithfulness of God!
 - Listen to what a missionary to India had to say about this in his journal back in December of 1856:
 - I have thought much on Ecc 11:1. Holy, prayerful, and devoted men, have spent their short Missionary lives in these districts; and no outward marks remain *according to man's eye* and thinking. But yet, we are assured, that their “labour should not be in vain in the Lord.” We must wait and work for the Lord in faith.
 - I have always respected the missionaries who had almost no visible fruit more than the ones who had a lot...
 - It is amazing to see how they pressed on for years, at times, without seeing a single convert.
 - They were men who believed the promise of God.
 - Do you believe God's promise?
 - Can you keep on sowing even when there is no reward for it in this life?

TRANS> So let us cast our bread on the waters—it will come back to us!

- Nothing done for the LORD will ever lose its reward!

III. Brothers and sisters, do not let the uncertainty of the future keep you from sowing!

A. Our text mentions the fact that you don't know what will happen.

- It is really emphasized in these six verses...
 - Four times we are told that we do not know the future...
- 1. The point is that when you sow, you don't know just how everything will turn out...especially when you sow on the water!
 - You simply cannot tell.
 - There is no place for self-sufficiency or for pretending that you know.
 - It is just as wrong to launch out with confidence that if you do such and such, such and such will be the outcome as it is to do nothing at all.
 - The arrogant man who thinks he has everything under control will have to be shown that he doesn't.
 - Solomon has been clear about this in Ecclesiastes time and again...
 - Everyone is going to die—we are not in control.
 - We have no idea what will become of our work or what will be after us.
 - The world is full of cocky entrepreneurs, and they often accomplish many things in their zeal,
 - but if they are proud and think they have life by the horns, they will be humbled.

2. Take a look...four times in six verses the wisest of men reminds us that we do not know how our ventures will turn out.
 - a. In verse 2, that you do not know what evil will be upon the earth.
 - Solomon has made that clear all along in Ecclesiastes.
 - Problems can pop out of nowhere, even when you have done all that you ought to have done to prevent them.
 - The race does not always go to the swiftest.
 - Even the best laid plans can end in disaster...
 - b. In verse 5 it tells us that we don't know twice...in an analogy...
 - that just as you do not know the way of the wind or how a child forms in the womb, so you do not know the works of God—what He will do.
 - If you don't know the most basic things in life, you cannot possibly claim to know the outcome of your actions...
 - Not unless God tells you what the outcome will be.
 - I add that because some people say that it is pride to believe what God has said and that you can't know that either...
 - But that is not pride at all—
 - Pride is when you delude yourself into believing that you know what God has *not revealed*.
 - It is another form of pride that rejects what He has revealed as if *that* cannot be known.
 - c. In verse 6, it says that you do not know whether sowing in the morning or the evening will succeed—or if both will succeed.
 - There no way to tell ahead.

TRANS> So the future is unknown to us.

- We simply do not know what the result will be when we sow, and we need to accept that...
 - We can't say that if we do a certain outreach as a church, a certain number of people will respond...we do not know that.
- B. But you must not let your lack of knowledge keep you from sowing...
- It is very hard for many people to go on and cast their bread on the waters when they do not know what the outcome will be!
 - It is much easier for us when we know—we go to work when we know we will get paid...but it is harder when we don't know.
 - But here are three pieces of advice about how to deal with the uncertainty.
 - This is counsel from the LORD to take to heart!
1. First, that the uncertainty of the future ought to cause you to act while you can!
 - a. Sow bountifully while you can...
 - because the day may come when—in fact it will come—when you can do no more!

- As Galatians 6:10 puts it,
 - **Gal 6:10: Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.**
 - If it is possible to do good now, make the most of it!
- We looked at the admonition in verse 2, framed in the Hebrew way that means to do all that you can—
 - **Ecc 11:2: “Give a serving to seven, and also to eight,”**
 - but now we see what is added—
 - **“for you do not know what evil will be on the earth.”**
- b. Many people make exactly the opposite conclusion about this!
 - When they don’t know what evil will come, they figure that they had better save up for hard times!
 - They draw in close up their heart to others to protect themselves like a turtle in his shell...but men are not turtles!
 - That is a faithless response!
 - If you take that approach and do not give to others while you can, then God will leave you to take care of yourself when days of trouble come!
 - He will leave it to you to use whatever you have stored up if you have neglected helping others.
 - Let me add that there is nothing wrong with saving up for hard times and preparing for them,
 - but know that most important way to prepare is to lay up treasure with God.
 - When you give to the poor, you lend to Him and He will pay you back.
 - What good will all that you have stored up do you when you are in the grave?
 - What good will it do in a crisis if it is not blessed of the Lord?
 - If it is in your power to give, give and God will look after you when days of trouble come.
 - In His economy, giving is the best way to prepare for hard times!
- c. Verse 3 teaches you to learn from the clouds!
 - When they are full of water, it is in order that they might pour out the blessing on the earth—not that they might hoard it!
 - When God has filled you with wealth, it is not that you might hoard it up, but that you might pour on those who need it.
 - Cast what you have on the waters while you can...
 - because the day may come when you have no bread to share—

- Perhaps you will be the one who needs help...
 - Certainly, you will not be able to share anything when you die—so do what you can now!
- Once that day comes, there will be no way to change what you have done...further opportunity will be lost!
 - As verse 3 also says, once the tree falls, there it lies—wherever it has fallen—
 - Once you die, you can do no more...
 - Forever, the record of what you have done is settled.
 - You will never be able to go back and do it again!
 - That is a very fearful thing to think about!

TRANS> So do you see the point?

- Do what you can while you can because the days are evil and times are uncertain—you don't know how long you will be able to do good so make the most of it while you can!
- 2. Secondly, our text advises you not to wait around for the perfect opportunity to serve...
 - If you do, you will never do anything at all!
 - Solomon speaks in verse 4 of the chap that is always checking the weather before he casts his bread on the water...
 - He wants to make sure the conditions are just right—that it is not too windy and not too stormy...
 - Verse 4 says:
 - **Eccl 11:4: He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.**
 - I am sure that you have all been there...
 - procrastinating—waiting until you have figured everything out—
 - always planning the details and making sure nothing will go wrong when you could have already done your project three times even if it had gone wrong!
 - It is fine to measure twice and cut once when you are building something...
 - but it is folly to measure all day and never cut at all!
 - Many people look lightly upon such behaviour, but not Jesus...
 - He calls that servant who was paralyzed with fear a **wicked and lazy servant** in Matthew 25:26...
 - He casts him into the place of outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

3. Third, Solomon advises you that your inability to know the outcome of your service ought to make you redouble your efforts...
 - If you do not know whether God will prosper the sowing that you do in the morning or the sowing you do in the evening,
 - the answer is to sow in both the morning and the evening!
 - You get the point!
 - Instead of doing less because you don't know if God will bless what you do, do more in hopes that He will bless something!
 - Are you unsure if God will bless a business venture?
 - Then do two ventures!
 - Are you unsure if a particular effort at evangelism will work?
 - Then do more than one effort.
 - Are you unsure if the Lord will bless morning worship?
 - Then do evening worship as well!
 - Are you unsure if your gift will really help the person you are reaching out to?
 - Then give them another gift—or give them instruction with the gift.
 - Redouble your efforts and let God use your work as He wishes.
 - You don't know the outcome and you cannot see the outcome...
 - But you can go ahead and cast your bread on the waters and see what God will do...
 - You can go ahead and do your duty and leave it in His hands to bless as He wishes.
 - There is so much we don't understand...
 - Why do our prayers seem to remain unanswered?
 - Why are problems encountered when we set out to do good?
 - Why do missions fail?
 - Why does God give me difficult relationships to contend with that never seem to change?
 - How can you expect to know the answer to all of these questions if you don't even know how a child forms in the womb or just what the wind is going to do?
 - Just go on and do what you can—
 - Cast your bread on the waters even though you can't tell where it will go or what it will do...
 - God has promised you that it will return you after many days.
 - You shall reap if you go on in faith!
 - Gal 6:9 says: **And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.**

Consider our Lord Jesus...

- When He went to the cross, He was, in a way, launching out into the unknown—casting His bread upon the waters!
- He could not reap unless He sowed...which is indeed how He spoke of His death—as a kernel of wheat dying but then bringing forth life...
 - **John 12:23-24: The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.**
- In the darkness of the cross, there was a time when He almost lost sight of the outcome...
 - As it says of Him in Isaiah 49:4, He said,
 - **Isa 49:4: “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain;”**
 - He could not see the outcome of His work yet, but He quickly adds,
 - **“Yet surely my just reward is with the LORD, and my work with my God.”**
 - He knew that in casting His bread on the waters for God, it would come back to Him after many days!
 - And it most assuredly did!
 - Not only was He raised up from the dead, but the whole church was raised up with Him!
 - Cast your bread on the waters as long as you have opportunity!
 - It will come back to you!