

Hope PCA Sermon: August 15, 2024

“The Measure of Faith” (Ecclesiastes 11:1–6)

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This morning looking again into the book of Ecclesiastes. We're in chapter 11. Chapter 12 is the last, so probably three more sermons after this, and I think we'll finally make it through Ecclesiastes, maybe either by the end of this year or early next year. So that's a good almost three years periodically looking into this very fascinating and wonderful wisdom book. This morning we'll be looking at chapter 11 verses 1 through 6, and if you would, if you're able, please stand as we honor God's Word as it is read and as we hear it this morning. Ecclesiastes chapter 11, verses 1 through 6, the very living Word of our living God. Let us pay attention to it.

- 1 *Cast your bread upon the waters,
for you will find it after many days.*
- 2 *Give a portion to seven, or even to eight,
for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.*
- 3 *If the clouds are full of rain,
they empty themselves on the earth,
and if a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls, there it will 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 the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

6 In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good

So for the reading of God's holy, infallible, and inerrant Word. May he bless it to our understanding and to our application in our lives. Please be seated. Let me pray for us as we come to the Word this morning.

Oh God, our Father, this is your Word. As it goes out this morning, may it fulfill the promise you made that it will not return to you empty or void, that it will accomplish all the purposes for which you have sent it out and be successful in the things for which you have given it this morning. May this be true here among us. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Some of you know, you've heard me talk about how in high school, I spent a couple years on the wrestling team. Now, I liked sports growing up, I still like sports today, but I mostly played baseball and basketball and those kinds of sports. Got cut from the basketball team on my junior year, had several friends on the wrestling team and thought, eh, why not? Might be fun. So I joined the team. And let me tell you, for two years, I was terrible! I lost a lot of wrestling matches. I was a fighter. I was squirmy. But I had the wrong build. I was too skinny. I was as

tall as I am now. I only weighed 140 pounds. And I wrestled in a (for reasons I won't get into here) I wrestled in a 158-pound weight class. It was terrible. I had fun, I was in great shape, but I was lousy at it.

Toward the end of our senior season, we had this match against another school, and the guy I'm scheduled to go up against is ranked number two in state. He's stocky. He's muscular. He knows what he's doing. I am not looking forward to this. But I thought, you know what? It's almost the end. I'm just going to go out and I'm just going to go at this guy with everything I got. And in all surprise to me, in the second round, I had him on his back in a reverse cradle. I got near-fall points, but I could not pin him. I wasn't strong enough to pin him. But I fought and I fought and I fought, and finally somewhere in the third round he wore me out. And like happened so many times, I'm the one who got pinned.

And what's interesting is that was my best wrestling match. of my whole time wrestling. I'd won a few, but they were against people who were even worse than I was. My best match ever was a loss. After we were done, we shook hands and he was very kind and said, "Wow, that was the toughest match I've had all year." He went on to go to state. I don't remember how well he did. And I went outside because the coach had to lock the gym and waited for I think 15 or 20 minutes at least in the cold and drizzle. Got a terrible cold and my season was over.

Weird story, right? But there was a lesson for me in the midst of it, a lesson that I've taken with me to this day. I learned that one's passion and one's determination really could make a difference in the results. Actually, I went out for track (that was my other favorite sport) and saw a significant improvement because I really worked at it, had a dedication to it. And in the years since, I've tried to be determined and persistent and not give up in those things which I believe are important. My faith, my job, my family, things like that.

Well, so what? Why tell that story? Well, in these interesting verses in the opening of Ecclesiastes chapter 11, I think the preacher has a kind of a similar lesson for us. And I want to explore that lesson in these proverbs that he's giving us in these six verses, and then some application at the end.

So last time in chapter 10, we looked at all these different proverbs that are collected there, and really the first four verses of chapter 11 could be part of that, But in looking at it, I think they really have a different theme. Last time, the proverbs were about folly and having wisdom instead of being foolish. This time, the proverbs, I think, are more about how to live wisely in this life under the sun. But they are kind of perplexing. Maybe as I read them you thought, what in the world is this about? "*Casting your bread upon the water.*" What in the world is this, is the Bible saying here? I want to approach these six verses in the pairs: verses 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6, and just consider them together.

So verses 1 and 2. There's an old song about "casting your bread upon the water and soon it will return to you". It was an old late 70s, early 80s Christian contemporary music song, up-tempo, had a nice beat. We sang it in choir, and our director, as he would often do, stopped us

in the middle of it and said, “So what do you think the lesson is here?” I don’t remember what people said, but I thought it was nice that he wanted us to know what we were singing about.

But what does it mean? What is the preacher saying when he says, to “*cast your bread on the waters, and after many days it will return to you?*” What’s that about? I think a lot of people think, well, maybe it’s about witnessing: just share the gospel, cast it out there, and eventually it will return to you. Perhaps. The three favored interpretations among the commentators are these.

First, it’s a picture of spreading financial resources around. In other words, don’t put all your eggs in one basket. So casting bread, which disperses when it’s in the water, is kind of like being diversified in your retirement investments. Having a diversified 401K and maybe some property investments like real estate or gold or whatever it is. That’s one interpretation of verse 1 in particular.

Second prominent interpretation is this is about international commerce. Again, many people think the preacher in Ecclesiastes is Solomon. And in 1 Kings 10 verse 22, we read about how Solomon would send out ships every three years to go trade with the nations of the world. And of course, that was a common thing, especially on the Mediterranean. Ships going out and returning, sometimes two, three years later, hopefully bringing back more than they went with. So again, this is a picture of bread being cast upon the water as these ships going out on the Mediterranean or the other seaways and eventually returning after many days.

The third primary interpretation is that casting bread is a picture of doing good to other people, doing good especially for those less fortunate. Eventually, if you do this for those less fortunate, someone will do it for you. Cast your bread. After many days, it will return to you. It’s almost like, well, karma, or paying it forward, or that sort of idea.

The trend today among most people, I think, seems to be that second option of international trade. Since it fits with the idea of risk and return in the ancient world, bread is often a metaphor for possessions, and commentators feel it fits with the rest of the passage that talks about sowing and reaping and not knowing how God will bless such an effort.

Now, before I give my own thought on this, take a look at verse 2. Verse 2 says now, “*Give a portion to seven, or even to eight.*” Maybe that rings a bell in your memory of biblical language that we find, for example, in proverbs where a number is quoted and then a higher number. An increase in numbers is a common feature of proverbs in the ancient Near East. It’s used in the Bible. Sometimes the number is meant to refer to something specifically, but oftentimes (I’d say most of the times) it’s meant to express a multitude or a completeness related to the idea that’s being taught in the proverbs. Think of Proverbs 6 verse 16: “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him.” And then it goes on to list those seven things. The idea in Proverbs 6 verse 16 is not to give an exact list of these are the things and these are the only things that God hates, but rather to communicate the idea that when it comes to wickedness, God thoroughly and completely hates it. Six, even seven. And of course, seven being a number that does signify a completion, a fullness of things. Here we

have seven going to eight. And I think the basic idea is to communicate a lot, a multitude of things.

So *“Give a portion to seven or even to eight”*. A portion of what? Well, a portion of something I have. Could be an allotment, as in the tribes of Israel. We’re told in the book of Esther that she took her portion from the king’s table. But it could just be a gift, a portion of a sacrifice given to the priests and Levites because they don’t have their own way to grow food or earn a living. It’s a part of something that I have, that I can give to someone else. And so to give seven or even eight is a picture of being generous, a picture indeed of being very generous.

And so if we take verses one and two together, they’re a pair, where does that lead us? I don’t think it leads us to international trade or philanthropy or to a diversified money portfolio or any other specific activity. Think about what happens when you throw bread on the water. Maybe you’ve done it yourself or done it with your kids or grandkids or some other people that you know. It doesn’t matter how hard the bread is. It doesn’t matter how soft. If a duck doesn’t get it or a fish, it just eventually it gets softer and softer and moister and moister and eventually it just breaks up. It disappears into thousands, if not millions, of tiny pieces that you can’t even see.

So I think the picture here of casting bread upon the water and being generous up to seven or even eight portions is a picture of being generous in our giving, being generous in such a way that we trust, that we have faith in the outcome. You don’t know what disaster might happen on earth. You don’t know what’s going to happen. And that’s a theme in this whole passage, the all six verses. We don’t know what God is going to do or how he’s going to do it. So don’t withhold. You cast that bread on the water and see it disappear, and you have to trust that in some way, shape, or form it will return. Something good will come of it, even though it appears to have been wasted, completely disappeared, gone. And yet we give generously to seven or even eight portions. and trust that when difficulty or trial or disaster of some kind comes, we’ll still have a portion that meets our needs.

This is another example of the preacher telling us what it’s like to live life under the sun, this life of vanity, of emptiness, of pointless living, purposelessness. Nevertheless, there is that God, our God, who lives in heaven, and there is a time and a purpose for all things under heaven. And so we can live in a way that demonstrates that we trust in the care of the God of heaven. Remember the ultimate point of Ecclesiastes: fear God and keep his commandments. Chapter 12 verse 13. Fear God, respect him, be in awe of him. And as we’ve talked about before, keeping God’s commandments takes faith. Trusting that if I do what he tells me to do, he’ll take care of me. Even if there’s opposition, even if there’s difficulty, even if there’s trials along the way. And I think what the preacher is putting before us is a picture of extravagant trust. generous trust. Is that our faith? Is that how we trust? Are we extravagant in our trust of God? Is that how we live? We’ll talk about that more in a little bit.

Looking at verses 3 and 4, these verses give us a picture of certain patterns and certain uncertainties in God’s creation, and of a man who’s paralyzed because of them. It’s a negative example that leads to verses 5 and 6. And it’s true. We can make simple observations in this life under the sun. When the clouds are full, it rains. It’s also a simple and true observation

that when a tree falls, it stays down. Seems kind of obvious. Just a little side note, that supposedly wise, philosophical, impressive question: if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it really fall? That's not wise. That's idiotic. When a tree falls, it falls. And it stays fallen. That's what God says right here. It's not rocket science.

But unfortunately, in verse 4, we have a picture of someone who will not sow his seed or reap the crop at the proper time because he's worried about the weather. Maybe the wind will blow too hard and wash the seeds away, or it will rain too hard and wash the harvest away. He won't go out and do the simple tasks that he knows how to do as a farmer because he's paralyzed trying to read the signs. Is today a good day to plant? Is tomorrow? Can I reap today? Can I harvest today? Is it too windy? Is it too rainy? The implication here is just do it. Just act. Do what you know how to do. Do it diligently. Do it fervently. Trust in God. Have faith. Be smart, but don't be paralyzed. At some point, we have to move forward and walk in faith, to live in faith.

And I think this is reinforced in verses 5 and 6. We don't know God's ways. And how often has that been a theme in Ecclesiastes? In prior chapters, it's this constant reminder that we get to fear God and be thankful for what he has given us in this life under the sun. Enjoy even the things that he's given us in this life under the sun. And now seems to be added the simple instruction: don't just sit around and do nothing. Go about your business. God has the outcome in his hands. Go about your business and do so with faith and with confidence and with trust. You don't know the outcome any better than you know how God puts the spirit of a human being into a child in its mother's womb.

Now we can argue, and I think we can argue very successfully, that life begins at conception. But how does the spirit of a human being, as the verse says (which indeed is different than the animals, because it bears God's image), how does it get into a new human being there in the womb as that baby grows inside his or her mother? I don't know. Nobody knows. We don't know these things. Does that stop you from making babies? No. Because we know it happens and we trust God that it happens. Neither does the farmer know when God is going to send wind that might destroy his crop, or blow his seeds away, or rain that would be beneficial versus harmful to his crops. He doesn't know. He can't predict it with accuracy and precision.

So the conclusion in verse 6, "*In the morning*", a metaphor for the beginning of the growing season, "*In the morning sow your seed*". In the evening, at the end of the season, harvest your crops. Don't withhold your hand from reaping, from bringing in the harvest. You don't know what will prosper. You don't know whether your sowing or your reaping will be good and beneficial, successful, or even a failure.

So what I think we have in the end here in these six verses is a picture of God calling us through the preacher to diligent, hard work. And sometimes we're even profligate, extravagant, humanly speaking, ridiculously generous in our efforts of sowing and reaping, casting our bread, giving our portions with generosity. Because the outcome is in God's hands. This is a picture of trust in God, of faith in God. And we might even say it's a picture of radical trust in God. Not withholding those portions, those generous portions. Even seeing

them disappear like bread disintegrating in water. Giving it out in multiple portions and trusting that it will return in some way, shape, or form That's an extravagant faith.

And this is, again, life under heaven intruding into life under the sun. Because there is a God in heaven. There is a God who is in control. And that God does indeed bless his people. Now, what I'm not saying is what the TV preachers like to say: "Sow your seed and you'll get a ton of money back. You'll get rich in return." No, the preacher stresses, we don't know the outcome. The bread disappears. The many, many portions go out. The seed is sown. We don't know the work of God who makes everything, says the preacher in verse 5. You don't know the work of God, the work of God who makes everything. So we must trust in God. We have to extravagantly, even radically, trust in God that he will take care of his people, that he will take care of me, that he will take care of my loved ones, that he will take care of you.

So this isn't about sowing a seed or dreaming big dreams and doing bold things. It's about normal life lived with extravagant trust in the God who cares for his people. The preacher's message is simpler than these TV preachers, and yet, in its simplicity, it's far more incredible. It allows us, it encourages us, to devote ourselves wholeheartedly and be willing to give to the point we can't see or keep track of what we give in. From my wrestling experience, wrestle your guts out on the mat and trust that God has the outcome in his hand and that it is good for me and it's good for those whom I love. And again, consistent with the message of Ecclesiastes, we can be thankful. We can enjoy whatever God gives us, in plenty or in little. Everything good is a gift from him and worth showing appreciation for.

Okay, so how do we do this? How do we live that kind of an extravagant faith, show that kind of extravagant trust in God? I'm going to suggest three things. There may be more, maybe others. These are pretty broad and maybe provide a decent start.

And the first is just repeating that consistent message that we've heard in Ecclesiastes so far: enjoy the life God has given to you. And I don't mean reluctantly. I mean really enjoy it. Really, truly enjoy it. John Piper made the idea of "Christian hedonism" popular some years ago. Christian hedonism, a life of pleasure. Describes it in light of the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "glorify God and enjoy him forever." He's known for saying that "God is most glorified in us when we are most pleased in him". How pleased are you in God? How pleased are you in the life that he's given you? The more faithful we are to God and Piper's way of thinking things, the more enjoyment we get from the Lord, from worshiping him, praying to him, appreciating the gifts that he's given to us, from using those gifts that he's given to us. The more we enjoy and appreciate the people he's put into our lives, our family, our friends, each other here in the church, the more we do these things and have this attitude, Piper argues, the more God himself is glorified, because he gave us these gifts.

Remember what the preacher said back in chapter 9 verse 7? "Go eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart." God has already approved of what you do. He's approved of it. Enjoy the life that God has given you. And even do it with a sense of abandon, of being profligates in our generosity. You know, we think of the story of the prodigal son and how he was prodigal or wasteful with his inheritance. But there's another use of that word "prodigal" that Tim Keller pulls on. He even wrote a book called "The Prodigal God". It just

means extravagant. Are we extravagant? Are we prodigal in our enjoyment of God and what he's given to us, even in this vain life under the sun? I think that's a key part of the preacher's message in this book.

Related to that, then, we can pursue a life of faith with a sense of abandon and even extravagance. And again, this isn't about material things or crazy wild acts to supposedly demonstrate our faith. It's the simple things. In your own spiritual life, are you willing to be extravagant in your pursuit of growth in Christ, in prayer, in Bible reading, in study, Maybe memorization of God's Word in service to others. If you're able to instruct in instructing others, giving counsel, sharing wisdom. Are you willing to spend (in this sense, extravagantly) your time, your effort, your desire, even if you're not certain of the outcome? Or are we going to be like the man in verse 4 who hesitates because he doesn't know what might happen? Think about Cain and Abel. Who gave the better portion? Well, we know it was Abel. He had the more extravagant faith, if you will, the more profligate, extravagant faith.

Are we extravagant, diligent, fervent in our prayer? Are we willing to pray for ourselves or others diligently, not giving up, continuing to storm heaven for the desires of our hearts, even if we don't see the results time after time after time after time? Will we keep it going? Will we keep it up long after those prayers have dissipated like bread in the water and we can't even see it anymore? Are we willing to be diligent in Bible study and Bible reading ourselves? We can use others to help guide us along the way, but to invest ourselves in this activity, in this study, in this learning, training ourselves or seeking training so that we can be a better student of Scripture, to understand it and know how to live it. I mean, why wouldn't we? It's such a reliable guide for life. Why not devote our time and attention to it rather than something else? There's all sorts of things we can study, many of them very worthwhile, but is there anything more precious, more valuable than God's Word itself? You will sow a very worthwhile seed in yourself if you're willing to do that. It will bear fruit. How? I don't know. God knows. It might take a lot of time. Remember, it returns in "*many days*", says verse 1. In this too, are we willing to be patient and persistent and even extravagant in our pursuit of the knowledge of God in his Word?

How well do we know Jesus, our Savior? I mean, really, really know him. We know our friends. We know our family. We know their traits, their behaviors, their personalities, their opinions. I found out that one of my cousins died this week. He and I were like brothers when we were kids. And I was thinking back, thoughts interrupted in the ensuing days, of things I remembered about him. I knew him well. Do I know Jesus that well? Do you know Jesus that well? Do you know what Scripture tells you about him and his work for you, his work for sinners? His work for you. How can we be imitators of Christ if we don't know who he is? Do we know him well enough to imitate him? What more important character study could we undertake? And what are we waiting for? Why are we so hesitant? Why do we throw up so many excuses? How can we really share about Christ with others if we don't know him? Nobody's done. How can we follow him if we don't know him? Can we pursue a life of faith with abandon and extravagance? Again, I don't mean running off to some foreign country to be a missionary. That might be your call in life, and if it is, wonderful. But there's an extravagance, there's an abundance, that we can pursue right here, right now, in our spiritual lives.

And then the third thing, building upon the first two: how extravagant is our faith when it comes to those around us? Our family, our friends, our neighbors, even our church, whether at Hope, our sister churches, the broader church. How are we willing to invest? What portions are we willing to give to seven or even eight portions generously so that those around us would benefit? Again, we're sowing the seed without knowing the results or being willing to wait a long, long time, many, many days. Can we be persistent in our training and teaching of one another? Can we be extravagant and persistent in sharing the Gospel with those that need to hear it? Persistent and extravagant in putting our resources that God has given us of time and talent and treasure to work for those around us. Who could you be extravagant with? It might be a spouse. It might be a child, a parent, family member. It might be a friend. It might be a neighbor, a co-worker. Who can you share the gospel with? Who can you mentor? Who can you pray for diligently? To whom can you witness? Who can you serve in some way without expectation of return? Someone who has a need that you can meet, but they can't meet yours. How can we be extravagant in our service to Christ's church? Not just as individuals, but as a congregation, how can we show our extravagant, profligate faith?

Why should our faith be extravagant, profligate, prodigal? Well, because that's how God was toward us in Christ Jesus, was he not? Is he not? He gave his very own Son for us and for our salvation. That Son who was obedient even to death on a cross. Talk about a bold, trusting act! He knew what lay ahead of him. "Yet not my will but yours be done", he said to the Father, trusting that the Father would raise him from death to life. Think about the language of Ephesians. We heard a little bit of it already this morning. Ephesians speaks of the riches of God's grace that Paul says have been "lavished upon us". That's not a tiny word. That's not an unpowerful word. Lavished. Poured out in extravagant abundance upon us, the riches of God's grace. We're told there that God is "rich in mercy". Rich in mercy. And because of the great love with which he loved us, while we were still dead in our trespasses and sins, we were raised to new life together with Christ. We're told later on that the riches of God's grace are immeasurable. You can't contain them. They're not known. They can't be grasped fully. His grace is immeasurable. And later Paul prays that we might know the height and the depth and the width and the length of the love of God for us in Christ Jesus. It can't be measured. It can't be contained.

Brothers and sisters, you are extravagantly loved. And you are powerfully saved. As we learned from Peter, you have a rich inheritance that is guarded for you in heaven itself. Whatever happens in this life under the sun, your heavenly riches are promised to you by God, who himself guards them and keeps them for you. They can't be taken away. They can't be lost. And maybe someone is hearing this, or will see it later, hear it later, and you haven't experienced that kind of love that is extravagant and immeasurable, come to Jesus and know and experience that love. Come to him in repentance and faith, and do not delay. The preacher's not calling us to be smart, he's calling us to trust, calling us to have faith, to have a prodigal, extravagant faith.

What will be the outcome in our day-to-day lives? I don't know. I don't know. But the call is to cast that bread out on the water, seven or even eight portions of it. My friend, go. Cast your bread. It will return to you, maybe after many days, maybe not till eternity, but it will return.

Cast your bread. See what God will do, for he will do, and we will be able to rejoice and give thanks, whatever he does.

Let me pray for us.

O Lord God, give us faith, grant us faith that looks not to ourselves, to our own abilities, that is not cowed or frightened by circumstances, but in the midst of the raging storm looks to you, our steady and steadfast anchor, the rock upon which we may build our house, that even when storms rise up, the house will stand firm. O Lord, give us faith. It's hard. It's hard to have faith at times. So strengthen us, equip us, guide us, teach us, lead us, O Lord. Help us to look to Christ and grant us your Spirit to work in us to increase our faith and to help us understand the things that you've taught us and put those things into practice. All this we pray in the precious and wonderful matchless name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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