

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Investors Needed

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

"Cast your bread upon the waters." This expression is widely used, and variously interpreted. To some, it means doing something kind or good without expecting anything in return. To others, it means you shouldn't refrain from an action simply because you fear the future. Like many other words, images, or phrases that have their origin in the Bible, "Cast your bread upon the waters" has taken on a range of possible interpretations.

There's even a gospel song based on it: "Well, there are people who think they're not receiving / Anything from God at all / Oh, they are shaken from their believin' / When they don't see results they quickly fall. / But don't you waiver, keep on living / In the way God wants you to / Don't get discouraged keep on giving / Soon it will come back to you. / Keep on casting your bread upon the water / Soon it's going to come back home on every wave / Keep on casting your bread upon the water / Soon it's going to come back home on every wave."

That song might be a little too upbeat for the writer of Ecclesiastes. After all, this book in the Bible has a reputation for being cynical and pessimistic. "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" That's the way Ecclesiastes begins. The word Ecclesiastes comes from a Hebrew term for someone who speaks to an assembly. As one commentator has pointed out, we may at first be a little surprised that this person got handed the microphone in Scripture. After all, there's a lot in this book that sounds very skeptical, doubtful, and mistrustful. The speaker raises all sorts of questions about life's direction and purpose, or lack thereof.

And yet, the speaker also recognizes that life includes many gifts from God. And even though these gifts aren't intrinsically fulfilling and can't offer lasting satisfaction, they can be enjoyed and used. Remember that time passes. Life is short. So the wise person stays alert, because in the midst of life's ongoing adversity and frustration, there are still opportunities that present themselves. The prudent person therefore takes advantage of God's gifts, and makes the most of what's available in this life.

That includes being generous with one's resources, including money and material goods. "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again." In its original context, this teaching may have been intended as very practical advice about how to invest money. The image itself comes from seafaring commerce, where ships were sent out to sell goods and receive a return. Anyone involved in this kind of business knew that it involved significant risk, and required lots of patience. Overseas travel was slow and laborious. But as with every kind of investment, no risk, no return.

That's why it was important, as verse two indicates, to diversify. Don't put all your financial eggs in one basket. "Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land." The speaker here in Ecclesiastes doesn't spell out these seven or eight investment opportunities. The business owner would actually be better off

consulting his mutual fund broker about that. After all, the broker would have a better sense of how tariffs and the ongoing trade war could affect profits.

But one thing is for sure. Without risks, there can be no results. In order to reap, you have to sow. You have to decide what you're going to do with what God has entrusted to you. You can hang on to it, cling to it, and do everything in your power to protect it, and in the process stifle its potential in the reign of God. Or you can release it for usefulness in the purposes of the Lord. Granted, those purposes may not always be clear or easy to understand. Indeed, they may be very mysterious and beyond your comprehension.

No one knows this better than the speaker in Ecclesiastes. He has looked in all sorts of places—nature, science, philosophy, even theology—hoping to unlock the secret to life's meaning, but consistently ends up frustrated with the seeming futility of it all. Over and over, in his search for answers to some of life's toughest questions, the speaker has come up against a wall of unknowing. In our text, he says that just as you can't explain how the wind works or control its direction, and just as you can't figure out the miracle of conception, so you can't understand the workings of God Almighty (v. 5).

But that doesn't mean throwing up your hands and quitting on life. Even if you can't explain God, or get explanations from God about how this all works, you can still live by faith. That's what the speaker does. He's not primarily a cynic or a skeptic, but a realist, a realist who still holds on to certain convictions about God. Convictions that are still part of our belief and our view of the world.

Even though we face daily circumstances, events, experiences, and issues that can cause us to join the speaker in his cry, "Meaningless! Meaningless!," we still believe that God is sovereign. He's still in ultimate control of the world and of history. Somehow, the world, and our lives, are still in his hands. And these are the hands of a God whom we believe is fundamentally good and just. By the time he reaches the end of his book, the speaker says, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:13-14).

So a sovereign, good, and just God, whose gifts are everywhere in our lives and in the world, holds us responsible for what we do with our lives. In other words, how we invest our lives. "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again." Who knows how long "many days" could be. The yield on a life invested in the reign of God usually takes time. It isn't immediate or easy.

One person tells the following story about teaching his child the importance of saving:

When our eldest daughter was old enough to understand what saving money was all about, my wife and I sat down with her and explained the value of money. We explained how you save, and when the piggybank was full, you take the money out and deposit it in a commercial bank so that it might draw interest. We thought we had done a thorough job. She seemed to understand and couldn't wait to open a savings account in our local bank by herself.

I called the banker in our little town and told him our daughter was on the way to open her savings account. We would stop in later and sign the necessary papers.

What a thrill! She got the president of the bank himself to wait on her. She handed over her savings, and he gave her a receipt and thanked her for her business. But she wouldn't leave. She just stood there like she was waiting on something else. "Is there anything else that I can help you with?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "I want my interest."¹

Investing takes time, and patience. Day by day by day by day, you're responsible for making choices about where you're going to deposit your life. Where will you invest God's gifts of time, talent, experience, education, training, energy, wisdom, ideas, and resources? Which people, places, causes, issues, and opportunities will be funded by how you give away your life? No matter how you answer these questions, you'll find that the return on your investment doesn't happen overnight.

Nor does it happen by waiting for what you hope will be the perfect circumstances, or the perfect time, or the perfect conditions. In our text, the speaker says, "Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap" (v. 4). If you wait until everything seems just right, or you have all the answers to life, then you may never move into action. You'll end up procrastinating, wasting time, and squandering opportunities that are right there in front of you in the messiness and brokenness of life.

That's why you need to be investing your lives in the will and purposes of God, faithfully and consistently, at all times, in all circumstances. As the speaker says in the last verse of today's text, "Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, . ." (v. 6). I know from my experience with you that when it comes to sowing and investing, your lives are not idle. You may not be able to control the outcome, and you may not know whether the return on your investment is in the near or the distant future, but you're busy casting your bread upon the waters day in and day out.

Your investments take many forms. Some of you are investing yourselves in supporting a family member who needs your help. Some of you are investing yourselves in a spouse who relies on your care. Some of you are investing yourselves in the lives of your children or grandchildren. Some of you are investing yourselves in organizations and agencies that work for justice and community development. Some of you are investing yourselves in jobs that serve individual needs and the public good. Some of you are investing yourselves in international causes that promote peace and flourishing.

And all of us are responsible for investing ourselves in the life of our congregation as an embodiment of God's sovereign love. Remember that God has given us this church as a fellowship where you can steadily and sacrificially deposit your life into the cause of God's kingdom. True, there's more to the reign of God than just this congregation. But the life of this community of believers is where we show that we're prepared to put some "skin in the game" to serve the Lord and his purposes in the world.

Preacher Haddon Robinson says:

In literature the story is told of a man who opens a newspaper and discovers the date on the newspaper is six months in advance of the time he lives. He begins to read through the newspaper, and he discovers stories about events that have not yet taken place. He turns to the sports page, and there are scores of games not yet played. He turns to the financial page and discovers a report of the rise or fall of different stocks and bonds.

He realizes this can make him a wealthy man. A few large bets on an underdog team he knows will win will make him wealthy. Investments in stocks that are now low but will get high can fatten his portfolio. He is delighted.

He turns the page and comes to the obituary column and sees his picture and story. Everything changes. The knowledge of his death changes his view about his wealth.²

The more aware you are of your mortality, as well as the limitations of your knowledge and understanding about life and its mysteries, the more wisely you can invest the time that you're given. True, we don't know the future, but we know the one who does. And our knowledge of God's sovereignty, goodness, and justice determines our investment philosophy: "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again."

¹ Don Young, Sr., at Preaching Today website. Accessed October 17, 2019 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2001/april/12989.html>>.

² Preaching Today, Tape No. 200.