

Act Boldly But Wisely In Faith

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[0 : 0 0] This evening, we're so glad you've joined us wherever you are in the world. We pray that as we worship God together, that we'll know his blessing, that we'll know his word coming to be blessed to us.

Just one intimation, do remember that we have a New Year's Day service. That's this coming Friday, New Year's Day. That's actually going to be held in the seminary, but we'll have it also as a live stream.

And that'll be at 12 noon. So that's Friday at 12 noon, New Year's Day, our New Year's service. It's always such an important thing to begin, not just each day with worship, but also to begin each week and also each year.

As we mark the passing of time, we come to offer our thanks to God and pray for his blessing as we turn another corner in life. We're going to begin this service tonight by singing in Psalm 63.

Psalm 63 in the Scottish Psalter. That's page 295 of the books we're singing to Chin Bays of Harris. So verses 1 to 6 of Psalm 63.

[1 : 2 6] Lord thee, my God, I'll early seek. My soul doth thirst for thee.

My flesh longs in that ripe harsh land, wherein no waters be.

That I thy power may behold, and brightness of thy face.

As I have seen thee here to fall within thy holy place.

Since better is thy love than life, my lips thee praise shall give.

[2 : 4 5] I in thy name will lift my hand, and bless thee while I live.

Even as with marrow and with fat my soul shall fill it be.

Then shall my mouth with joyful lips sing praises unto thee.

When I do thee upon my bed, remember with delight.

And when on thee I meditate in watches of the night.

[4 : 0 1] Amen. Amen. Now we're going to turn to read God's word. Tonight we're reading from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, verses 14 to 30.

Matthew 25, beginning of reading at verse 14. Here is Jesus talking about the coming of the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

And something of what the kingdom of heaven is like. As you know, he describes the kingdom of heaven in various ways throughout the Gospels, especially the Gospel of Matthew. He's got a number of descriptions of the kingdom.

And here from verse 14, he says, And he also who had two talents came forward, saying,

Master, you deliver to me two talents. Here I have made two talents more. The master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little.

[6 : 04] I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed.

So I was afraid. And I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours. But his master answered him, You wicked and slothful servant.

You knew that I reap where I have not sowed and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers. At my coming, I should have received what was my own with interest.

So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance.

But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

[7 : 11] Amen. And may God bless to us, reading that portion of his word. We're going to engage now in prayer. Let's call upon the Lord and join together in prayer. Lord, our gracious God.

As we come to you this evening, we come both to give and to receive. We come to receive all that you offer to us through the gospel of eternal life.

We come to give to you the worship that is due to your holy name. We bless you, O Lord, that in the experience of your people, the receiving and the giving meet together in this worship.

We come bringing, O Lord, our offerings of praise and our prayers and petitions. We come seeking to meet with you, the living God, through your spirit and through your word.

We come to you, O Lord, to meet with you so that we will receive what you have to offer to us through the gospel. O Lord, we bless you for the abundance of your offering.

[8 : 17] And while we do give thanks for that, we also give thanks that we are able to offer you the worship that we seek to give to your holy name tonight. But we do confess, O Lord, that our offering is poor compared to yours and that our offering is tainted with our sin, whereas what you offer to us is always perfect and pure and entire.

We give thanks, O Lord, for this opportunity once again. We thank you as we come to the close of another year, that we can look back upon it with much thanksgiving, even though it has been a year so unlike what most of us have ever experienced before.

We thank you, O Lord, for your care and for your care, especially in our spiritual lives, for the way that you have continued to look after your people. We bless you, O Lord, for your care and for your people.

We pray that you have to come. We pray that as we find further restrictions in this time of further spread of the virus. Lord, we pray that you would draw us nearer to yourself.

We pray that you would teach us even more of the need to depend upon you. And teach us, we pray, to walk in your ways, to appreciate what it is you have to give to us.

[10 : 03] And to appreciate all the more how God promises to be a refuge and a fortress to those who trust in him.

A strength to those who know their own weakness and who come to him for strength. We thank you, O Lord, that your strength is made perfect in our weakness.

That it comes into its own to empower us and to sustain us when we know of our own weakness and our inability in so many ways. We thank you tonight for all the ways in which people have come to provide for us during these critical times.

For the number who have cared for others in various situations and circumstances in our land. We thank you, O Lord, for that. For the provision you make for carers both in our communities and in our hospitals and care homes and hospices.

We thank you, O Lord, for those who attend to our health. We pray that you bless them as they continue to provide such a valuable service. And, O Lord our God, we know that there are parts of our nation that at this time are feeling the pressure once again.

[11 : 22] Where hospitals are coming near to capacity. Where staff are feeling stressed out. And I feel, nevertheless, that they need to continue to give of their services.

Lord, we pray that you would remember them and continue to bless them in the work that they do. We ask, too, that you bless us in our homes and families at this time.

Lord, when we are unable to visit others the way that we would like to or used to. The way that we cannot attend to even visiting loved ones.

Or those of us in pastoral care who cannot visit those in their homes as we used to. In situations of bereavement or illness. We pray, Lord, that you would continue to look upon us in your mercy and favour.

And bring us better times. Bring us times when we can fulfil once again. All that we would seek to do to the delight of our hearts and looking to others and their need.

[12 : 20] As well as our own. We pray that you would continue to bless the gospel. Furnish us, Lord, we pray, with fresh outpourings of your spirit. And help us to continue to serve you in the measure that we can.

In testifying to your goodness. To your grace in the Lord Jesus Christ. In coming to reveal to others the wonders of your grace working in our own lives.

Bless tonight, we pray, any who have not closed in with what you offer them in the gospel. Who have not yet come to accept and receive that great gift of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That friend, as we heard this morning, that sticks closer than any brother. We thank you, Lord, for the continuing way in which the gospel addresses us.

And comes to provide us with what we require for our salvation. Lord, there is so much that we don't know. So much that we don't have access to in our limited knowledge.

[13 : 22] And in our limited wisdom. We thank you that all things are known to you. And that in your perfect knowledge. That the welfare of your people is stored for time and for eternity.

And we pray that we may rest content with all that is true of you. And all that we know you have already done and will do for your people. We pray your blessing tonight for those who may be struggling.

Not only with issues of health, mentally or physically. We do commend them to you. We pray too for those who are struggling with their faith. Struggling with their relationship with you.

And seeking further help from you, Lord, to attend to those matters. Especially when access to advice and to counsel from others is maybe not as easy as it was.

Lord, we pray that you would bless all who are struggling. All who are finding it difficult to continue to keep trusting in you. And to seek to depend upon your word.

[14 : 27] And upon the promises made therein. Lord, we pray that you would sustain them. Strengthen them, we pray. And also we pray for those who are mourning the loss of loved ones.

In whatever circumstances, Lord, we pray that you would bless them all. And when the evidence of death has been heightened through the COVID pandemic itself.

We pray that you would turn us, O Lord, to yourself as the Lord of death and resurrection. The one who came, the living one, who came into this world. Who died and who rose again and who is alive forevermore.

O help us, Lord, we pray, to anchor our life in your own. And in that life that you offer us in Jesus Christ. Lord, we ask you blessing again for our young people, for our children.

Help them to reflect upon the things that have happened in their own lives during this year. Whether it be in their homes or families or in school or in other classes.

[15 : 28] In Sunday school. We thank you for the ongoing provision of teaching both in our day schools and Sunday school. Lord, we pray for our young people and our children. That you would continue to bless them.

And help them to value all the more. The Lord who is spoken of in his word. In the Bible. In the preaching of the gospel. In the testimony of his people.

Who has shown forth. Remember again, we pray our leaders in the nation. And throughout the world. The world leaders of our time. Lord, again we pray that you would give them wisdom.

Even above what you have given them thus far. We ask especially that they will have the wisdom of that light of your spirit working in their own lives. Help them to realize, O Lord.

How infinite are the resources that you have. In the store of grace that is with you. And help them to apply to yourself. In faith and independence for it.

[16 : 27] Graciously, Lord. Bless them at this time. With the strength that they need of mind and body and spirit. And enable them, we pray, to continue to lead us.

And to seek further help and guidance from those who give them counsel. Receive our thanks, O Lord. Now we pray. Continue to bless us.

Accept this of praise and cleanse us from all our sin. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Now children, I'd like to just say a word to you. We're still continuing the Christmas theme.

Although Christmas Day is obviously past now. But we're still quite close to it. And this is the festive season as we refer to it so very often. I'd like you tonight just to think of the words of Matthew chapter 2 and verse 11 especially.

Matthew chapter 2 verse 11. We already looked at part of this chapter earlier on as we think, as we thought of the coming of Jesus. And here we find in verse 11, the wise men who came from the east to visit the baby Jesus.

[17 : 34] And when they came to the place where they saw the star resting and stopping, they went into the house. They saw the child in verse 11 of chapter 2 with Mary his mother.

And they fell down and worshipped him. And then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And then we read that they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

So they went another way back to their own country. And these words especially of verse 11 are so important for us. Here was a baby, an infant, just newly born, not very long in the world.

And in this manger, lying as he'd been put in a manger, wrapped around with the cloths that his mother had washed, had wrapped around him.

And the first thing you read about there is that they worshipped him. They saw the child with Mary his mother. They fell down and worshipped him.

[18 : 35] Isn't that amazing? Because the only person that we should be worshipping is God. And yet that's what these people did. They worshipped this baby in the manger.

And that tells us something important about this baby. And they recognised that. These people who had come from the East, they recognised that this was someone to worship.

That this was someone who was worthy of worship. That this was somebody that needed to be worshipped. That's what we make of Jesus as well.

There are so many things we think of when we think of the infant Jesus, the baby Jesus. We think of God having come into this world and taken our humanity, our human nature to himself, to be born of a woman, the son of God, to be born of Mary, his human mother.

And all of that is so wonderful and beyond really our full understanding of everything that's involved in it. But one thing we must never forget is that he continued to be God.

[19 : 41] And as he continued to be God, so people continued rightly to worship him. That's the Jesus that we worship tonight. We worship the Father and the Holy Spirit too because we worship God as one God.

But we worship Jesus, the person who came into the world as son of God. We read there that they worshipped him. And I hope tonight and every day that you know what it is to worship God, to worship Jesus, to give your thanks to Jesus, to come every day and tell him how much you love him, how much you love everything he's done for you and continues to do for you, that you tell him what your needs are, your need for forgiveness, your need for strength, your need for everything that's required for us to face each and every day, whatever it's going to contain.

Only God can give us that strength. This is the Jesus, as we worship him, that gives us that strength. But then secondly, they did something else as well as worshipping him.

They opened their treasures. They had brought treasures with them and they offered him gifts. They didn't just offer it in such a way as said, will you please take this?

They just gave it to him. That's what it means. They offered, they gave him these gifts. And we read that they were gold, gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

[21 : 07] And people have various ideas as to what these precious objects actually stood for. What do they represent? I want to just suggest that they represent three things about Jesus that are important for us to remember about him.

First of all, the gold represents, as it usually does, royalty. Because the person that they were looking at, although this is a baby, and of course, as we've said, he's still God.

And so he is, in fact, the king of the universe. There's a real mystery that we cannot understand everything about this, that this person who's now become Jesus, the human Jesus, is still God and therefore he is the royal king, the king of everything that's been created, the one in charge of everything.

And he is our king tonight and we worship him as our king. And so I hope that you, in your own life, have come to the point where you see Jesus and speak to Jesus as your king, as the one who is on the throne of your heart, if you like.

That's so important that we give Jesus our heart to rule over us, to be our king. Secondly, the frankincense really indicates how Jesus is God, as we've said.

[22 : 36] Something that was used in worship in the Old Testament in a sense that represented what was being offered to God, very often the prayers of people represented by incense rising up out of the temple or the tabernacle.

But incense is something that represents an offering made to God. And it reminds us of the fact that Jesus is, in fact, God himself.

And thirdly, there's also myrrh. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. And myrrh would represent the humanity of Jesus, the humanness of Jesus, because it's very often represented, it's very often represents what we associate with the death of Jesus.

In those days, as we read in the Gospels, when Jesus died, they came to anoint his body for burial. Very often the case that spices were used as the body was wound in the cloths before burial, spices were used, and myrrh was a special part of that.

So we associate the myrrh with the death of Jesus. Now, it doesn't mean that these wise men, at that point, knew exactly that Jesus was going to die.

[23 : 53] But when we're reading this, it reminds us, as we read it, that he had come into the world, the Son of God, had taken out humanness in order to die.

That was especially why he came into the world, so that he would die the death of the cross, and that through that death, and his resurrection, we would be saved.

That is why God sent his Son into the world, that whoever believes in him would not perish, in other words, would not die spiritually, but through Jesus, would have everlasting life.

So tonight, I hope that you know Jesus as your King, as God, the Son of God, and also Jesus through his death, how he has paid the price of your sins and my sins, so that we may be forgiven, and find friendship with God.

There is nothing more amazing, in our human experience, than to have friendship, with God our Creator, through Jesus Christ.

[25 : 06] So let's say the Lord's Prayer. Let's pray together the Lord's Prayer. Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, and earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. We're now going to turn for a second reading, and this is a passage for our study tonight, to Ecclesiastes.

And we've reached chapter 11, in our studies of Ecclesiastes. We're reading Ecclesiastes chapter 11, and verses 1 to 6. We're just going to look at these six verses tonight.

Ecclesiastes chapter 11, verses 1 to 6. Cast your bread upon the water, for you will find it after many days.

[26 : 10] Give a portion to seven, or even to eight. For you do not know what disaster may happen on earth. 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.

He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. 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.

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.

Now we've been seeing how important, as far as possible for us, how important it is to find some leading thoughts in the chapters or the passages of Ecclesiastes as we've been going through, as we read through it.

Very often the passages, the chapters seem to be just a loose arrangement of verses that seem, at first reading, to be randomly put together, maybe not closely connected.

[27 : 24] But we've seen that there are threads, as we've called them, that you can find in most of these passages. And as you find the thread, or the leading thought of the passage, we can call it a thread, you can see how the verses then, around it before and after it, how they actually relate to that thread, or to put it another way, how that thread runs through the verses of that passage.

You remember last time, we saw the thread was really set out at the beginning of chapter 10, Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment to give off a stench, so a little folly, a foolishness, outweighs wisdom.

And we saw that the thread then, that runs through the chapter, is that a little amount of foolishness can undo a great deal of wisdom.

Something that is done in wisdom, even done over a long period of time, can quickly be undone by a little amount of foolishness. And we followed that thread through chapter 10.

And now as you come to chapter 11, the thread here is that we're called to act boldly. We're called to act boldly in faith, but also in wisdom.

[28 : 40] So we can say the thread of our message, or the message thread or title tonight, is act boldly but wisely in faith. And you'll find that also, of course, throughout the scriptures elsewhere.

Let's look first of all, in following that thread, trying to tease out the various parts of it. Let's look firstly at the imperatives, as we'll call them, the commands that are commanded to certain actions, to act boldly.

You find that verses 1 and 2, and also in verse 6. Because look at the things that are commanded here, these imperatives. Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.

Give a portion to seven, or even to eight. And then in verse 6, you have the imperative there, to sow in the morning. Sow your seed, and at evening do not withhold your hand.

So these are all imperatives. And as you would expect in those times, they have to do with some of the circumstances that they would have been involved with in the life of the time.

[29 : 48] Making bread, sowing seed, agricultural terms, things like that, which the writer is using in order to try and convey his meaning.

But it's not as easy as simply to say that it's about bread, and it's about sowing seed, and things like that. Because the word cast in verse 1, there literally is, send out your bread upon the waters.

And there have been different opinions among theologians and interpreters as to commentators, as to what that means. Some people say that simply, we just take it literally, it means bread.

You just cast your bread on the waters, but it's difficult then to really make sense of the following part of the verse, for you will find it after many days.

If you think of the bread that would be used then, or still used, the flat kind of harder bread, like pita bread or something like that, you could perhaps imagine that being given out, or cast, or sent out on the waters, and that it would float, and then be found sometime.

[30 : 53] But what meaning is there in that? And anyway, it's not very likely that bread would last a very long time if you cast it out on the surface of any water. So what does it mean then?

You will find it after many days. That's why others have then gone to interpret this in a way that sees this as a reference to grain or to seed. Because in those days, especially if we take it as we've done, that Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes, and Solomon himself had made arrangements for having many ships that would take produce back to Israel, to Judah, and would actually then send his ships to different places in the known world of the time.

And we read in 1 Kings chapter 10 that he had actually arranged a harbour in Ezion Geber, which was on the shores of the Red Sea, so that he would have a harbour there for his ships, along with those of Hiram, the king of Tyre.

And together they managed the fleet that brought various goods, such as gold. We read there in chapter 9 of 1 Kings, he built a fleet of ships at Ezion Geber near Eloth on the shore of the Red Sea in the land of Edom.

And Hiram sent with the fleet his servants, seamen who were familiar with the sea, together with the servants of Solomon. And they went to offer and brought gold from there, 420 talents, and they brought it to King Solomon.

[32 : 25] In chapter 10, we read, the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years, the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks.

So there's an insight into the workings of a merchant fleet that Solomon himself had arranged so as to keep bringing stuff to him from different parts of the world, valuable commodities.

And you can see why interpreters would then see this as a reference to giving or sending out your bread. The seed that you would give was seed that you could use for making bread, but you could also use it in trading and receive back other goods in return.

And that's possibly the best way of looking at the reference there in verse 1. Because after many days, that's the return, you could say, of sending out the grain, the merchant ships carrying this, sending that out, they would return with various commodities, as mentioned, 1 Kings chapter 9, as we've read.

That's one way of taking it and that's probably as good a way as any of interpreting that verse 1. And then give a portion to 7 or even to 8, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.

[33 : 50] And instead of that being to do with merchandise, with trading and so on, it seems that that's really business language where it's saying, give a portion to 7 or even to 8, divide out your investments, sort of one thing fails, you're still left with others and the whole thing hasn't become a disaster.

Diversity in the various ventures in which you engage in, whether it's a king or whether it's just ourselves, ordinary people in this world, you would say today that that amounts to the kind of phrase we use, don't put all your eggs into one basket.

Something like that is how people interpret that verse as well. But this has also been used and indeed we're going to use it in some way like that too later on in the study of application of these verses.

People have used this as a basis for acts of charity where give a portion to 7 or even to 8 is something that we're called upon to do just to give a maximum as much as possible to those who are in need and therefore we ourselves will not only have a sense of satisfaction but we will be bringing benefit to those who are in need.

People have interpreted the passage that way as well. Verse 2. I'm just setting before you the ways in which this can be actually done. But the common thing here is that we are not to keep back to ourselves what we can and should be using either for our own benefit or for the benefit of others.

[35 : 24] That is really part of the thread act boldly but wisely because we'll go on to see how it's not a wise thing how it's not a bold thing to keep back to yourself something that you should have used by way of a personal investment and especially in the use of our time or our talents or our services in the gospel and we'll come to that in the New Testament.

We read one of the passages in Matthew 25 which I think very closely ties in with the parable of the talents and the story of the talents where the person with the one talent went and hid it in the ground and of course his master came back and instead of praising him condemned him for the way in which he had just kept that to himself.

So these are the imperatives there are different ways of interpreting these imperatives in verses 1 and 2 and the same in verse 6 there which obviously has to do with agriculture in the morning sow your seed at evening don't withhold your hand don't keep it back.

So that theme of not keeping back to yourself something that you ought to have used in another way it keeps repeating itself down through these verses and so that's why we come then to our second point looking at the imperatives let's look at the application to act boldly but wisely in faith.

Now I want you to notice four times in the passage these words for you do not know or as you do not know you do not know they're used four times.

[37 : 01] You find it there in verse 2 you do not know what disaster may happen on the earth. Verse 5 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.

Same in verse 6 you do not know which will prosper this or that. So from that we're going to take this point. We have to act boldly but wisely in faith despite the fact there are many things we do not know.

The fact that we do not know certain things should never be an argument in favour of keeping to ourselves what the Lord would have us to give out. And you can see that in verse 1 for example if we take it that that's a reference to the merchandise the merchant ships going out after many days you will find it.

Give out send out your bread send out your seed send out this cargo for you will find it after many days. It doesn't come back all at once.

It means that there's a wait until you get the return. There's an uncertainty about it if you take it that this is to do with ships going with grain to different parts of the world you'd have to wait then and indeed we read in 1 Kings 10 that only every three years did they come back.

[38 : 22] So that's fitting in with you will find it after many days. They could have used that bread and kept it all to themselves instead of trading with it to make bread or rather used it in other ways but they knew that they had to use this in order to get things which they couldn't get locally in their own situation so they had to trade with it and that's the point that's made despite the fact that you do not know some of these ships would be wrecked.

Some of these ships would be lost on their journey and the cargo would be lost but that's not an argument oh well let's not do that then. Let's just look at the possibility of that ship going astray or that ship actually coming to sink somewhere or coming to to be a wreck and sinking with all its cargo and because of the possibility of that let's not do that let's just keep things for ourselves.

He's saying send out your bread on the waters or you will find it after many days for you do not know what disaster may happen.

The point is this even though you do not know nevertheless do it. What you have to do what you know is right to do do it.

And then look at verse 4. He who observes well look at verse 3 first of all if the clouds are full of rain they empty themselves on the earth if a tree falls to the south or to the north in the place where the tree falls there it will lie.

[39 : 57] And what is that saying? We probably need to take verse 4 as well he who observes the wind will not sow he who regards the clouds will not reap. What he's saying here is there are certain things that happen inevitably in life that we simply cannot control.

Here he is saying when the clouds are full of rain you know that that rain is going to fall and it shouldn't actually be an argument against you doing what you need to do. And if a tree falls to the north or to the south in the place where it falls there it will lie you can't do anything about that.

There are events in life that we cannot ourselves control that we cannot arrange to stop. This pandemic is one such example a very prominent example. It's gone throughout the world.

We've seen so much in our own nation so much damage done so many lives affected so many additional deaths so many families bereaved. We find all these restrictions.

There's nothing much we can do about that happening. We can seek to mitigate it to deal with it once it comes but there's nothing we can do about its coming.

[41 : 06] It's simply going to happen. It's an act of God. It's part of God's providence. We can't stop it happening so we have to act now in the things that are important for us spiritually and morally to do.

And you can actually take verse 6 along with that Now that's a picture of somebody in the agricultural world a farmer perhaps who has a seed and wants to sow his seed and he's just deliberating with himself the morning's not looking too good just now better leave it till the evening and the evening time is not looking any better so you just keep it back and wait for tomorrow.

Now this doesn't mean that we don't actually plan or do some assessment in order to actually follow through with the things in life that we need to do.

We need to do that spiritually as well. But what it means is that if we wait for perfect conditions all the time we're actually going to lose out. We're not going to manage the moment properly.

And verse 6 is really saying don't dither over whether it's best to sow in the morning or in the evening. The temptation for all of these is that we'll just not do it at all.

[42 : 26] We'll just hold back. We'll just keep to ourselves. Psalm 126 or something similar to that we'll sing it in conclusion. But it speaks there about the person who goes forth bearing precious seed.

You know how precious seed was especially in those days and to this day of course seed is precious. if you're going to actually grow a crop from which you make bread or whatever you have to first of all sow the seed.

You have to give it away before you can get a return. There's no use keeping it to yourself and saying well I'll just use it all to make bread because then you'll have nothing to make bread on next year.

You have to have a crop in order to keep the cycle going. And it must be very tempting must have been very tempting and still is very tempting in that agricultural setting to say I really don't have much seed in order to feed my family so I think this year I'll just keep most if not all of it behind and keep it to ourselves and just try and make do.

Well you can't do that. They're saying you have to sow your seed. You're going out and mourning it says with precious seed. You're seeing it in a sense lost as it goes into the ground.

[43 : 44] You can't pick it up and reuse it yet you know you have to do that in order to get next year's crop. So the temptation is let's just leave it let's just keep it back.

Now Jesus actually has an illustration of this for us and this is where we pick up the connections with the New Testament with the Gospels and Ecclesiastes.

Remember Jesus in John chapter 12 we have an account there of Jesus coming to speak to some who came to Philip and said to him Sir we wish to see Jesus.

Philip went and told Andrew Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus and then in a strange kind of way Jesus replied the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Truly truly I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone but if it dies it bears much fruit.

[44 : 46] Now he's talking there first and foremost about his own life about giving himself to death because without that death there's not going to be a crop of righteousness that we can gain from.

But he extends that then in verse 25 to the Christian's life to the believer's life whoever loves his life loses it and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

If anyone serves me he must follow me where I am there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me the Father will honour him. And really that's pretty much the same as he said elsewhere that you must if you're going to follow me you must deny yourself.

You must give yourself away. You can't hold on to your own life so as to just keep it to yourself and try and manage or micromanage your own life.

You have to give it away. You have to give it to Jesus. You have to put it in his hands. You have to do the equivalent of giving the seed that's going into the ground and dies in the ground and unless it dies it cannot bear the fruit that you're looking for.

[45 : 56] It's the same in your own life and in my life. Unless we give our life unless we sow our life as it were into the soil that is Jesus himself. if we keep it to ourselves we're going to lose it is what he's saying.

He who loves his life he who wants to just keep things as they are he will lose it. And whoever hates his life and of course that has a special meaning there it doesn't mean hate in the absolute sense it means that you want to actually give it over rather than keeping it to yourself and indeed there's a way in which we can say we do come to hate things about ourselves in our sinful lifestyle as we are by nature and that's something that we come as God teaches us come to hate.

We don't like that side of us that's something we need to deal with and how do we deal with it? We give our life over to Jesus. We sow the seeds of our life into his soil and from that springs new life crop of righteousness.

The same thing similarly or a similar thing anyway in what we read in Matthew chapter 25 and you recall there that Jesus as we saw was speaking about the coming of the kingdom and the kingdom is a powerful spiritual force if you like that runs through people's lives and involves people takes people in and then runs through their lives let's read that for another time but he says he'd be like a man going on a journey then we read the parable of the talents and what's interesting is what he said to the man who had hidden his talent you wicked and slothful servant you know that I reap where I have not sowed and gathered where I scattered no seed then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest in other words he's saying why didn't you give away what I gave you to make more of it that's the whole point of Ecclesiastes 11 1 to 6 you give away what needs to be given away in order that in return you or somebody else will have a benefit from it give out your bread upon the waters for you will find it after many days give a portion to seven or even to eight for you know not what disaster may happen on the earth sow your seed in the morning and in the evening withhold not your hand for you don't know what will prosper this or that it's not for us to know everything about what we give away in terms of a spiritual witness about conversations of the preaching of the gospel we don't need to know that we don't know how that seed is going to grow we don't know where that's going to result in our return leave that with God however long it takes so let's apply that now we have to act boldly but wisely in faith despite the fact there are things we do not know so how do we apply that practically to our lives well first of all we apply it to our spiritual progress because in our spiritual progress the temptation is always let's just keep what we've got and let's keep it to ourselves and keep it just the way it is let's have more certainty let's have more perfection let's have more evidence of perfection of certainty before we move on with our life before we actually do things which we know we really ought to be doing well again we're coming back to this point that very often we stress in our preaching of the gospel and that is that our assurance grows through our acting in faith not through keeping things back and not acting in faith maybe you're since this pandemic and these restrictions have taken place maybe you've been giving a lot of thought and indeed I hope you have if you've never actually taken communion just taking one example it's an example that very often is associated with this sort of thinking and you've realized since this pandemic caused all of these restrictions and we can't actually have a communion in a meaningful way we have restrictions on our lives in terms of how many people can meet together right now physically in any one place you've maybe come to realize well taking communion is really an important aspect of my

Christian progress progress it's something which I'd intended doing but just never got to the point and I was looking for more assurance and looking for more evidence before I actually took the step and did that and that applies itself to other aspects of your spiritual life as well well here is something that tells you in the light of that providence don't keep to yourself what you need to give away in order to advance don't say it's fine as it is for the moment I'll just keep things the way they are this has taught you this providence how crucial it is to deny yourself to sow your seed in the morning to make use of every opportunity we are given by God to progress spiritually in life and whatever aspect of your life tonight that may be speaking to this is something that's really pretty crucial for you isn't it have you actually given your life to Christ have you taken that step have you sown that seed of your life have you deposited your life into his hands are you still trying to hold on to it yourself you know it's something you should be doing you know it's something you intended to do you know it's something that you perhaps think of doing one day but this pandemic has taught you there's no certainty about that what this is saying to us is do it now do it while you have the opportunity do it so that through that assurance will actually grow with you that you are the

[52 : 26] Lord's that he is yours our spiritual progress is involved in this giving away in this casting of bread upon the waters if you like so from that there will be a greater return as God will bless his promises to us secondly it's applicable to our evangelism or to our outreach or witness we will have failures there will be failures in our evangelistic endeavours in our personal witness there will be all kinds of things that will cause failure in that people may never respond to the gospel the way we would like them to respond people will never come to be converted as far as we're concerned as far as we can see even if we have been witnessing to them for many years and there will be mistakes even in terms of church planting as well but we must never come to the point of saying I don't think they're really going to respond very meaningful so I'll just keep this to myself I don't think I'll go there with my seed or I don't think we could plant a church here or there whether it's on the mainland or wherever else it is it doesn't look a very likely ground for growth for spiritual growth no way to leave that to the Lord maybe you've been praying for someone for all your

Christian life and still that person seems unmoved maybe you'll never see that person converted maybe you'll die and that person will not have come to the Lord whether it's in regard to children grandchildren or some adult or neighbour whatever it is that does not mean that there is no reason now to sow anymore cast your bread upon the water you will receive it after many days let me tell you a story of a man called Luke Short Luke Short lived as a young boy in the time of John Flavell the Puritan minister who lived in Dartmouth for most of his ministry Flavell died in 1691 so this would be going back this man's life he would be a teenager when this happened when he heard Flavell preach he would have been a teenager something like 15-16 so that would be the early 1600s but this man

Luke Short was with his family then went abroad across the Atlantic to New England as it was then called and settled there and that's where he then continued to live and he became a farmer in New England and he kept on amazing strength bodily strength and mental strength right through till he was 100 years old and when he was 103 he sat down in a field one day and all of a sudden a sermon that he had heard from Flavell on 1 Corinthians 16 verse 22 if anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ let him be accursed and the thought of coming under the curse of God or being treated in eternity as accursed or distant from the Lord or sent away to hell it became such a weight on his mind that he was there and then converted he gave himself to the Lord that was 85 years after he heard that sermon of

Flavell's as a young lad 85 years and the epitaph on his gravestone reads as follows here lies a babe in grace aged three years who died according to nature aged 106 in other words he's saying I was converted when I was 103 so spiritually I'm a baby I'm only three years old but in terms of my whole life I was 106 when I died don't lose hope when you're sowing your seed cast your bread upon the waters for you will receive it after many days it applies to us in preaching the gospel as much as to anyone else we may never see the return on the seed that we have been planting in the name of the Lord and yet here is something that tells us sow your seed in the morning don't withhold in the evening for you do not know what will prosper this or that

God knows that and thirdly that applies I want to just say this before we conclude it applies to our spiritual progress it applies to our evangelism or personal witness it applies thirdly to out helping of the needy reaching out to the poor to those who have addictions to those who have life's problems as we know they exist we're not to put that off not to put helping them off to another time we're not to wait for better conditions we're not going to be like the person there in verse 4 he observes the wind will not sow he regards the clouds will not reap they're just waiting for perfect weather so they just keep things back and then all of a sudden the opportunity is gone whenever you have the opportunity it's saying to do good to others whatever that's going to be don't leave it to better conditions do it now and remember those who are seeking to give help to those suffering from various addictions or problems in life and as we reach out to them we remember the words of the Lord in Luke chapter 14 and remember there how

[58 : 13] Jesus spoke about giving without any prospect of return and Luke chapter 14 verses 12 to 14 he said to the man who had invited him he said when you give a dinner or a banquet do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid but when you give a feast invite the poor the crippled the lame the blind and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you you will be blessed at the resurrection of the just in other words it's saying the same as Ecclesiastes give a portion to seven or even to eight give out your bread on the water sow your seed in the morning or in the evening whenever the opportunity is there it's saying just do it boldly but wisely in faith or spiritual progress or evangelism or helping of the needy we act despite what we do not know but I want to finish by saying we act also according to what we do know look at verse 5 as you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb as you do not know the work of God and then it says who makes everything and these words struck me as I was preparing really just on their own in context the God who makes everything why do we act boldly but wisely in faith why do we reach out with the gospel not knowing so much in relation to how this works or who's going to be in the crop that returns or all of the things we've seen we don't know we have to act also according to what we do know and we do know that God knows and makes everything in other words when I preach the gospel as I'm preaching the gospel tonight on many other occasions like my fellow preachers as you sow your spiritual seed for your own spiritual progress for your evangelistic endeavour for your helping of the needy the important thing is you don't keep it back simply because you don't know certain things you do it because you know that God makes everything whatever the response is going to be

God knows it already God is fully aware of it indeed God has purposed it that's how he has ordained it that's how he has purposed it and that gives us the certainty that encourages us not to hold back because when we sow the seed of the gospel of a personal witness what we're saying is I don't know how this is going to grow or even if it's going to grow at all in that person's life but I know God makes everything whether it's in return or not whether it's fruitful or not God knows and God makes everything and when we're looking for people to be converted lives to be changed believers to advance here's really the key to it all it is

God who makes that work and that's why we don't hesitate to act boldly but wisely in faith let's pray Lord we ask that you would help us to fulfill our privileges and our duties in this life whatever Lord we need to do in your name help us to do it without hesitation even if we do at times need to plan and assess help us to do that also help us Lord not to retain what we ought to give out help us not to give out what we ought to retain make us wise we pray to know the difference give us especially to reach out with the gospel and its message to those who are in need and to ourselves also that we may advance receive our thanks now we pray and continue with us for Jesus sake Amen well our final singing this evening as I mentioned in the course of the seven Psalm 126 again it's in the

Scottish Psalter version Psalm 126 to tune Denfield when Zion's bondage God turned back as men had dreamed were we then filled with laughter was our mouth our tongue with melody it's in page 419 if you're using the Psalm books when Zion's bondage God turned back and we know the final verse there the man who bearing precious seed in going forth doth mourn he doubtless bringing back his sheaves rejoicing shall return may God make it to be so for us too when Zion's bondage God turned back when Zion's bondage God turned back as men that dreamed were we then filled with laughter was our mouth our tongue with melody they among the heathens said the Lord great things for them hath wrote the Lord has done great things for us whence joy to us is brought as streams of water in the sound our bondage glory call is so in tears a reaping time of joy and joy they shall that man who bidding precious heed in going forth doth mourn he doubtless bringing back his sheaves rejoicing shall return now may the grace of the

Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always Amen thank you once again for joining us at this service of worship and I trust that in these days to come towards the end of this year that you'll continue to know the Lord's blessing the Lord's care the Lord's protection and that as you come through God willing to 2021 that it will be a year full of rich blessings for you and for your loved ones too thank you best you and all

[66 : 15] I used to live youumb to