

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Bold Faith: First Conclusion

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Dear Friends,

In Ecclesiastes Solomon presents us with a candid and honest confession of his greatest failures and his greatest blessing, God's wisdom in his life. Although the historical books of the Old Testament clearly document his compromises and failures to live consistently by the wisdom that God gave him, Ecclesiastes reflects an autobiographical insight into his final conclusion about life and ultimate meaning. Beginning with [Ec 11](#), Solomon begins to lead us to his final conclusions for life according to God's will, not our own. Throughout this book he has reminded us on occasion that life "under the sun" can only end in futility, but life lived according to God's way leads to joy and contentment. We discover meaning in God, not in self-indulgent pursuits. Before taking us to the ultimate "conclusion of the whole matter," Solomon will gently lead us through three practical, life-changing conclusions regarding how to live life according to God's way. You could give three titles to these three conclusions: "Bold Faith," "Bold Joy," and "Bold morality." We often classify the people we know as "givers" or as "takers." Solomon will lead us boldly down the path that affirms an unselfish, giving disposition as the only acceptable walk of faith for the man or woman who seeks to follow God and to live life according to God's commandments. We have all met people who invest admirably in their Christian service for the wrong reason. Be it a man in public ministry or that quiet, but very sincere, believer in the pew, the motive for every act of Christian service that pleases God deals with giving and serving, not with getting. If I am to admire Solomon for his honest confession, I should do no less regarding my own life. I made a public profession of faith in Christ, was baptized, and began my ministry in my mid-teen years. I came to terms early on that my ministry would be in a different region of the country than where I lived at that time. This conviction motivated me to travel among godly churches in various regions of the country. I was in a frantic search for "my place," for "my ministry." Every effort failed! Several years later I began to grow in my view of Christian living and ministry to the point that I realized that my ministry was not about "my place." It most definitely was not to be "my ministry"! My role, if it was to be blessed, had everything to do with God and unselfish service to His people, not about "my place." For the first time in my walk of faith, I began to experience contentment and joy in my Christian service. Scripture consistently leads us down a well marked path. The more I strive to get for myself the less I shall have. The more I strive to give of myself to and for the benefit of others the more I shall have of what is good and noble in life. We pay ready lip-service to this concept, but we struggle intensely with its practice. From beginning to end through a variety of scenarios, Solomon in six brief verses leads us to the consistent "bottom line" of meaning in life. We do not realize true value and meaning as long as we do things for self. We only reach those profound insights and conclusions to the extent that we give, give, and give some more in service to others. No less than what we do, motive—not always known by others, but always clearly known by God—is essential to godly living and the realization of meaning that values something greater than ourselves. May we learn Solomon's lessons well so that we will not repeat his empty pursuits during his long, lean years. God bless, Joe Holder

Bold Faith: First Conclusion

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth. If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in

the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good. (Ec 11:1-6)

In his commentary on Ecclesiastes Derek Kidner gives the title to these verses "Be Bold." He views these verses as the beginning of Solomon's conclusion in which three practical conclusions are reached from his reasoning through the book before the final "conclusion of the whole matter" appears at the end of chapter twelve. A number of commentaries make commerce the primary objective of the lesson. However, I doubt that Solomon would devote ink to commerce in the midst of a spiritual and personal pursuit for meaning and purpose. We occasionally sing a hymn that builds its words on this passage. The hymn urges liberal giving, not at all in conflict with New Testament teaching, but it is almost as far from the context as the commerce view. Both views offer an unduly narrow interpretation that misses the greater context and flow of Solomon's thought, at least from my perspective. D. A. Carson includes the commerce view in his commentary, but he also broadens his interpretation in a more contextual direction. "Everything in [Ec 11:1-6](#) could be summarized in the word 'faith'... Neither an ominous outlook (clouds full of rain) nor the unexpected event (a tree falling) must hinder our enthusiasm for life. We cannot control events even when we can anticipate them (the clouds and the rain). Nor can we precisely determine how events will work out; the tree falls where it will. Next is a warning against procrastination (4), and a warning that we are not to be put off by ignorance (5). 6 Then the Teacher calls for vigorous sowing of seed. The proverbs concern not merely agriculture but the whole of life." [1] The analogy of "casting bread" is often made synonymous with sowing seed. Perhaps the idea is present, but "bread" and "seed" are not the same word or the same idea. The Hebrew word translated "bread" in this passage typically refers to literal bread, a basic part of the Hebrew diet. Imagine that you are hungry and have a limited amount of food, "bread." What is your inclination; to eat it or to throw it onto the surface of a body of water nearby? The option of throwing your bread on the water should catch our attention. It is not the normal or usual thing to do with bread. In fact we could view it as shockingly unnatural. Once thrown onto the water you never expect to see it again. It is gone. However, Solomon adds a second "attention-getter" to the first by his assurance that you "shall find it after many days." Our "natural" human disposition is to hoard up whatever we can for our personal needs and future. The altered "nature" of a regenerate (saved, born again) person urges a gracious, giving disposition that is as foreign to our fallen, sinful disposition as throwing away your last loaf of bread when you are hungry. Solomon adds emphasis to this theme by his numeric progression in the admonition to give to seven—and also to eight. The idea is to give, give, and then give some more. Consider the typical attitude of people regarding the idea of Biblical service and the New Testament concept of self-denial and cross-bearing. The cross in the New Testament does not refer to a pretty piece of jewelry or a logo that appears on the cover of your Bible. It was a brutal sign of Roman capital punishment. Self-denial is as foreign to man's sinful self-worshipping disposition as a hungry man throwing bread on the water instead of eating it! The common human reaction to giving defends not giving on the basis of all the uncertainties that might come in the future. "I'm saving for a rainy day" captures the idea. To be sure, Scripture does not direct us to be frivolous or foolish in our management of our resources or our planning for our personal future. However, it also does not permit us to live the "me-first" mindset that prevails in our culture today. Carson captures the point of the passage in his observation that neither "an ominous outlook" nor "the unexpected event" should hinder our Christian conduct. The walk of faith is not a paranoid and self-preserving way of life. Whether we consider the blowing of the wind and the movement of the clouds or the mysterious wonder of a baby growing inside its mother's womb, Solomon's first conclusion advises a steady course in "bold faith" and optimistic living according to God's Word. Finally, at the end of the lesson rather than at the beginning, he takes us to the field and advises us to sow our seed liberally. The farmer who clutches his seed and

refuses to let it go in sowing will have nothing to show for his labor in the harvest season. The only way to gain for the farmer is to sow his seed; let it go, plant it in the ground. Some of the seed sown will die in the ground, but most of it will sprout and grow into healthy plants, producing a good harvest and increase for the farmer who was willing to let it go in the constructive process of sowing.

Interesting, isn't it, that from beginning to end in this passage, Solomon follows a consistent pattern of urging us to give, even when the act contradicts our perceptions of self-interest and signs of an uncertain future. Carson's opening comment, "Everything in [Ec 11:1-6](#) could be summarized in the word 'faith'," captures a broad and contextual view of the lesson, fully compatible with Kidner's "Be Bold" idea. After confessing in distinct autobiographical terms his own pursuits, at times his foolish pursuits, Solomon stays the course and leads us to conclusions in the end that restore our respect for the wisdom that marked him in his youth. God bless his honesty in confronting the sins and foolish ventures that marred his life for a time. You question that he pursued folly. Consider [Ec 7:25](#), "...to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness," (The word translated "know" in this verse can mean either to know by observation or to know by experience.). Whether we study the Old Testament or the New, Solomon's wisdom writings or Paul's epistles to New Testament churches, the primary characteristic of Biblical faith leaves uncertainty with God and boldly follows God's instructions for life, not one's own perception of convenience or personal choice. Giving, not getting, characterizes true Biblical faith. Although this concept distinctly includes our financial support of the church of our membership, as well as other godly ministries, the passage defines a holistic attitude and way of life. It covers every aspect of the "faith-walk," not just our checkbook. Would people describe you and me as "givers" or as "getters"? If we act according to our personal interests and not the gracious benefit of others, Solomon gets in our face and rebukes us. I truly believe a person's calendar and checkbook profoundly reveal the person's whole life, but these material evidences represent more the symptom than the cause of a deeper spiritual malady. Living above one's financial means to the extent that no money is available to contribute to the church of one's membership and related godly ministries is symptomatic of the person's spiritual condition. If you were able to look into this person's heart and mind, you'd see a person who is self-indulgent, lacks self-control, and lives life more by impulse, emotion, and appetite than by godly wisdom. The checkbook provides the evidence, but the lack of self-control, or the investment of self in personal indulgence to the satisfaction of one's own appetite, whether for material things or for attention and compliments from others, is the true culprit. In this amazing lesson on giving Solomon breathes a deep breath of New Testament air into his ancient letter of wisdom. Christian living for the benefit of others is as natural for a godly conscience as for the farmer to give up his choice seed in sowing. Despite the sense of rightness in this giving spirit, far too many professing Christians continue to live life as if "It really is all about me." At some level they likely realize that the life they are living lacks the enthusiastic vibrancy of bold faith, but they have allowed self to rule on the throne of their life too long to consider a new ruler. "I know I should..." often flows from their lips, followed by a long string of rationalizations that attempt to justify why God's rules for authentic Christian living do not apply to them. Neither Solomon nor Jesus makes such exemptions for self-indulgence! The more you keep the less you have. The more you give the more God adds to your life. This amazing rule applies not only to our wallets, but also to every aspect of the life that we live each day. "I'm doing this for me" is a dead give-away to the self-indulgent spirit that predicts spiritual famine with infallible certainty, even if the claim relates to Christian service. It is as self-serving and as Christ-denying as the dreadful hymn "Will there be any Stars in my Crown?" Will heaven really be about the all capital "ME" and "MY" crowns of merit? Forget the theological heresy that views heaven itself as all about "me" and "my" crowns. Why do you live the Christian life today? What do you hope to gain by it? If your answer focuses on benefit for self, you need to revisit Solomon's earlier chapters in which he pursued every aspect of self-indulgence and reached the predictable conclusion that such a lifestyle of self-worship is "vanity and vexation of spirit." In our time the name Hugh Hefner exemplifies the self-indulgent, hedonistic lifestyle. Despite incredible

indulgence—perhaps because of it—this lifestyle offers nothing of lasting benefit to its followers. Not long ago as I was "surfing" across the channels of my television, I stopped on a channel in the middle of a Hefner interview. This wrinkled, pathetic old man was still trying to convey the appeal of his hedonistic philosophy. He was wearing loud colored silk pajamas! My first response was one of disgust, not attraction. When they take Hefner to the mortuary, what will he wear? His hedonistic pleasures shall abruptly end! Solomon could have surpassed Hefner many times over, but he possessed a wisdom that realized the utter folly of such a lifestyle. He tried it and walked away from it! Ecclesiastes is his final commentary on his life. Living for the benefit of others, not self, clashes with our sinful disposition, but it is the right and the blessed way to live. **O**ur final question for this chapter deals with motive. Why do we live the Christian life of self-denial? Why do we invest in ministry to others? Far more often than we should, many of us do the right things for the wrong reasons. If we work for our church, visit the sick, or otherwise minister to those who cannot care for themselves, all to receive notice and praise from others for the noble things that we do, we've missed Solomon's point. Wise, godly living, living for God and for others, is its own reward. Jesus makes a repetitive point in the Sermon on the Mount. God will see to it that we get the "reward" that we seek. If we perform exemplary Christian service "to be seen" of men, we shall have our reward. They shall see, and they shall praise us. However, if praise from other people is our true motive, we should expect no more! The better godly motive provides its own reward. If we live a sacrificial life, invested in service to, and for the benefit of, others, with no interest in good words and compliments from other people, simply because God taught us to do it, and it is right, God becomes our rewarder. **W**e cannot expect a "Well done" from other people and a "Well done" from God as well. The desire for either of these rewards de facto excludes the other.

Elder Joe Holder