

CHAPTER 11

In this chapter we have,

I. A pressing exhortation to works of charity and bounty to the poor, as the best cure of the vanity which our worldly riches are subject to and the only way of making them turn to a substantial good account (v. 1-6).

II. A serious admonition to prepare for death and judgment, and to begin betimes, even in the days of our youth, to do so (v. 7-10).

~~2110~~ ECCLESIASTES 11:1-6

THE OBLIGATION TO BE LIBERAL

Solomon had often, in this book, pressed it upon rich people to take the comfort of their riches themselves; here he presses it upon them to do good to others with them and to abound in liberality to the poor, which will, another day, abound to their account. Observe,

I. How the duty itself is recommended to us, v. 1.

1. *Cast thy bread upon the waters, thy bread-corn upon the low places* (so some understand it), alluding to the husbandman, who *goes forth, bearing precious seed*, sparing bread-corn from his family for the seedness, knowing that without that he can have no harvest another year; thus the charitable man takes from his bread-corn for seed-corn, abridges himself to supply the poor, that he may *sow beside all waters* (~~2320~~ Isaiah 32:20), because as he sows so he must *reap*, ~~4007~~ Galatians 6:7. We read of the *harvest of the river*, ~~2320~~ Isaiah 23:3. Waters, in scripture, are put for multitudes (~~4665~~ Revelation 16:5), and there are multitudes of poor (we do not want objects of charity); waters are put also for mourners: the poor are men of sorrows. Thou must give *bread*, the necessary supports of life, not only give good words but *good things*, ~~2387~~ Isaiah 58:7. It must be *thy bread*, that which is honestly got; it is no charity, but injury, to give that which is none of our own to give; first *do justly*, and then *love mercy*. "*Thy bread, which thou didst design for thyself, let the poor have a share with thee, as*

they had with Job, ^{<3817>}Job 31:17. Give freely to the poor, as that which is *cast upon the waters*. Send it a voyage, send it as a venture, as merchants that trade by sea. Trust it *upon the waters*; it shall not sink.”

2. “Give a portion to seven and also to eight, that is, be free and liberal in works of charity.”

(1.) “Give much if thou hast much to give, not a pittance, but a *portion*, not a bit or two, but a mess, a meal; give a large dole, not a paltry one; give *good measure* (^{<4168>}Luke 6:38); be generous in giving, as those were when, on festival days, they *sent portions to those for whom nothing was prepared* (^{<4390>}Nehemiah 8:10), worthy portions.”

(2.) “Give to many, *to seven, and also to eight*; if thou meet with seven objects of charity, give to them all, and then, if thou meet with an eighth, give to that, and if with eight more, give to them all too. Excuse not thyself with the good thou hast done from the good thou hast further to do, but hold on, and mend. In hard times, when the number of the poor increases, let thy charity be proportionably enlarged.” God is rich in mercy to all, to us, though unworthy; he *gives liberally, and upbraids not* with former gifts, and we must be merciful as our heavenly Father is.

II. The reasons with which it is pressed upon us. Consider,

1. Our reward for well-doing is very certain. “Though thou *cast it upon the waters*, and it seem lost, thou thinkest thou hast given thy good word with it and art likely never to hear of it again, yet *thou shalt find it after many days*, as the husbandman finds his seed again in a plentiful harvest and the merchant his venture in a rich return. It is not lost, but well laid out, and well laid up; it brings in full interest in the present gifts of God's providence, and graces and comforts of his Spirit; and the principal is sure, laid up in heaven, for it is *lent to the Lord*.” Seneca, a heathen, could say, *Nihil magis possidere me credam, quam bene donata — I possess nothing so completely as that which I have given away. Hochabeo quodcunque dedi; hae sunt divitiae certae in quacunque sortis humanae levitate — Whatever I have imparted I still possess; these riches remain with me through all the vicissitudes of life. “Thou shalt find it, perhaps not quickly, but after many days; the return may be slow, but it is sure and will be so much the more plentiful.”* Wheat, the most valuable grain, lies longest in the ground. Long voyages make the best returns.

2. Our opportunity for well-doing is very uncertain: “*Thou knowest not what evil may be upon the earth*, which may deprive thee of thy estate, and put thee out of a capacity to do good, and therefore, while thou hast wherewithal, be liberal with it, improve the present season, as the husbandman in sowing his ground, before the frost comes.” We have reason to expect *evil upon the earth*, for we are born to trouble; what the evil may be we *know not*, but that we may be ready for it, whatever it is, it is our wisdom, in the day of prosperity, to be in good, to be doing good. Many make use of this as an argument against giving to the poor, because they know not what hard times may come when they may want themselves; whereas we should therefore the rather be charitable, that, when *evil days come*, we may have the comfort of having done good while we were able; we would then hope to find mercy both with God and man, and therefore should now show mercy. If by charity we trust God with what we have, we put it into good hands against bad times.

III. How he obviates the objections which might be made against this duty and the excuses of the uncharitable.

1. Some will say that what they have is their own and they have it for their own use, and will ask, Why should we *cast it thus upon the waters*? Why should *I take my bread, and my flesh, and give it to I know not whom*? So Nabal pleaded, ^{<0251>}1 Samuel 25:11. “Look up, man, and consider how soon thou wouldest be starved in a barren ground, *if the clouds over thy head should plead thus, that they have their waters for themselves; but thou seest, when they are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth, to make it fruitful, till they are wearied and spent with watering it,* ^{<371>}Job 37:11. Are the heavens thus bountiful to the poor earth, that is so far below them, and wilt thou grudge thy bounty to thy poor brother, who is *bone of thy bone*? Or thus: some will say, Though we give but little to the poor, yet, thank God, we have as charitable a heart as any.” Nay, says Solomon, *if the clouds be full of rain, they will empty themselves*; if there be charity in the heart, it will show itself, ^{<315>}James 2:15, 16. He that *draws out his soul to the hungry* will reach forth his hand to them, as he has ability.

2. Some will say that their sphere of usefulness is low and narrow; they cannot do the good that they see others can, who are in more public stations, and therefore they will sit still and do nothing. Nay, says he, *in the place where the tree falls, or happens to be, there it shall be*, for the

benefit of those to whom it belongs; every man must labour to be a blessing to that place, whatever it is, where the providence of God casts him; wherever we are we may find good work to do if we have but hearts to do it. Or thus: some will say, “Many present themselves as objects of charity who are unworthy, and I do not know whom it is fit to give it to.” “Trouble not thyself about that” (says Solomon); “give as discreetly as thou canst, and then be satisfied that, though the person should prove undeserving of thy charity, yet, if thou give it with an honest heart, thou shalt not lose thy reward; which way soever the charity is directed, *north* or *south*, thine shall be the benefit of it.” This is commonly applied to death; *therefore* let us do good, and, as good trees, *bring forth the fruits of righteousness*, because death will shortly come and cut us down, and we shall then be determined to an unchangeable state of happiness or misery according to what was done in the body. As the tree falls at death, so it is likely to lie to all eternity.

3. Some will object the many discouragements they have met with in their charity. They have been reproached for it as proud and pharisaical; they have but little to give, and they shall be despised if they do not give as others do; they know not but their children may come to want it, and they had better lay it up for them; they have taxes to pay and purchases to make; they know not what use will be made of their charity, nor what construction will be put upon it; these, and a hundred such objections, he answers, in one word (v. 4): *He that observes the wind shall not sow*, which signifies doing good; *and he that regards the clouds shall not reap*, which signifies getting good. If we stand thus magnifying every little difficulty and making the worst of it, starting objections and fancying hardship and danger where there is none, we shall never go on, much less go through with our work, nor make any thing of it. If the husbandman should decline, or leave off, sowing for the sake of every flying cloud, and reaping for the sake of every blast of wind, he would make but an ill account of his husbandry at the year's end. the duties of religion are as necessary as sowing and reaping, and will turn as much to our own advantage. The discouragements we meet with in these duties are but as winds and clouds, which will do us no harm, and which those that put on a little courage and resolution will despise and easily break through. Note, Those that will be deterred and driven off by small and seeming difficulties from great and real duties will never bring any thing to pass in religion, for there will always arise some wind, some cloud or other, at

least in our imagination, to discourage us. Winds and clouds are in God's hands, are designed to try us, and our Christianity obliges us to endure hardness.

4. Some will say, "We do not see in which way what we expend in charity should ever be made up to us; we do not find ourselves ever the richer; why should we depend upon the general promise of a blessing on the charitable, unless we saw which way to expect the operation of it?" To this he answers, "*Thou knowest not the work of God*, nor is it fit thou shouldst. Thou mayest be sure he will make good his word of promise, though he does not tell thee how, or which way, and though he works in a way by himself, according to the counsels of his unsearchable wisdom. He will work, and none shall hinder; but then he will work and none shall direct or prescribe to him. The blessing shall work insensibly but irresistibly. God's work shall certainly agree with his word, whether we see it or no." Our ignorance of the work of God he shows, in two instances: —

(1.) We know not what is the way of the Spirit, of the wind (so some), we know not whence it comes, or whither it goes, or when it will turn; yet the seamen lie ready waiting for it, till it turns about in favour of them; so we must do our duty, in expectation of the time appointed for the blessing. Or it may be understood of the human soul; we know that God made us, and gave us these souls, but how they entered into these bodies, are united to them, animate them, and operate upon them, we know not; the soul is a mystery to itself, no marvel then that *the work of God* is so to us.

(2.) We know not how the bones are fashioned in the womb of her that is with child. We cannot describe the manner either of the formation of the body or of its information with a soul; both, we know, are *the work of God*, and we acquiesce in his work, but cannot, in either, trace the process of the operation. We doubt not of the birth of the child that is conceived, though we know not how it is formed; nor need we doubt of the performance of the promise, though we perceive not how things work towards it. And we may well trust God to provide for us that which is convenient, without our anxious disquieting cares, and therein to recompense us for our charity, since it was without any knowledge or forecast of ours that our bodies were curiously wrought in secret and our souls found the way into them; and so the argument is the same, and urged to the same intent, with that of our Saviour (⁴⁰²⁵ Matthew 6:25), *The life*, the living soul that God has given us, *is more than meat; the body*, that

God has made us, *is more than raiment*; let him therefore that has done the greater for us be cheerfully depended upon to do the less.

5. Some say, “We have been charitable, have given a great deal to the poor, and never yet saw any return for it; many days are past, and we have not *found it again*,” to which he answers (v. 6), “Yet go on, proceed and persevere in well-doing; let slip no opportunity. *In the morning sow thy seed* upon the objects of charity that offer themselves early, *and in the evening do not withhold thy hand*, under pretence that thou art weary; as thou hast opportunity, be doing good, some way or other, all the day long, as the husbandman follows his seedness from morning till night. *In the morning* of youth lay out thyself to do good; give out of the little thou hast to begin the world with; *and in the evening* of old age yield not to the common temptation old people are in to be penurious; even then *withhold not thy hand*, and think not to excuse thyself from charitable works by purposing to make a charitable will, but do good to the last, *for thou knowest not* which work of charity and piety *shall prosper*, both as to others and as to thyself, *this or that*, but hast reason to hope that *both shall be alike good*. *Be not weary of well-doing, for in due season*, in God's time and that is the best time, *you shall reap*,” ~~400~~ Galatians 6:9. This is applicable to spiritual charity, our pious endeavours for the good of the souls of others; let us continue them, for, though we have long laboured in vain, we may at length see the success of them. Let ministers, in the days of their seedness, sow both morning and evening; *for who can tell which shall prosper?*

~~2111~~ ECCLESIASTES 11:7-10

A CAUTION TO THE YOUNG

Here is an admonition both to old people and to young people, to think of dying, and get ready for it. Having by many excellent precepts taught us how to live well, the preacher comes now, towards the close of his discourse, to teach us how to die well and to put us in mind of our latter end.

I. He applies himself to the aged, writes to them as fathers, to awaken them to think of death, v. 7, 8. Here is,

1. A rational concession of the sweetness of life, which old people find by experience: *Truly the light is sweet; the light of the sun is so; it is a pleasant thing for the eyes to behold it.* Light was the first thing made in the formation of the great world, as the eye is one of the first in the formation of the body, the little world. It is pleasant to see the light; the heathen were so charmed with the pleasure of it that they worshipped the sun. It is pleasant by it to see other things, the many agreeable prospects this world gives us. The light of life is so. Light is put for life, ~~ROM~~ Job 3:20, 23. It cannot be denied that life is sweet. It is sweet to bad men because they have *their portion in this life*; it is sweet to good men because they have this life as the time of their preparation for a better life; it is sweet to all men; nature says it is so, and there is no disputing against it; nor can death be desired for its own sake, but dreaded, unless as a period to present evils or a passage to future good. Life is sweet, and therefore we have need to double a guard upon ourselves, lest we love it too well.

2. A caution to think of death, even in the midst of life, and of life when it is most sweet and we are most apt to forget death: *If a man live many years, yet let him remember the days of darkness* are coming. Here is,

(1.) A summer's day supposed to be enjoyed — that life may continue long, even many years, and that, by the goodness of God, it may be made comfortable and a man may *rejoice in them all*. There are those that *live many years* in this world, escape many dangers, receive many mercies, and therefore are secure that they shall want no good, and that no evil shall befall them, that the pitcher which has come so often from the well safe and sound shall never come home broken. But who are those that *live many years and rejoice in them all*? Alas! none; we have but hours of joy for months of sorrow. However, some rejoice in their years, their many years, more than others; if these two things meet, a prosperous state and a cheerful spirit, these two indeed may do much towards enabling a man to *rejoice in them all*, and yet the most prosperous state has its alloys and the most cheerful spirit has its damps; jovial sinners have their melancholy qualms, and cheerful saints have their gracious sorrows; so that it is but a supposition, not a case in fact, that a man should *live many years and rejoice in them all*. But,

(2.) Here is a winter's night proposed to be expected after this summer's day: *Yet let this hearty old man remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many.* Note,

[1.] There are *days of darkness* coming, the days of our lying in the grave; there the body will lie in the dark; there the eyes see not, the sun shines not. The darkness of death is opposed to the light of life; the grave is a *land of darkness*, ~~1841~~ Job 10:21.

[2.] Those *days of darkness* will *be many*; the days of our lying under ground will be more than the days of our living above ground. They are many, but they are not infinite; many as they are, they will be numbered and finished when *the heavens are no more*, ~~1842~~ Job 14:12. As the longest day will have its night, so the longest night will have its morning.

[3.] It is good for us often to remember those *days of darkness*, that we may not be lifted up with pride, nor lulled asleep in carnal security, nor even transported into indecencies by vain mirth.

[4.] Notwithstanding the long continuance of life, and the many comforts of it, *yet* we must *remember the days of darkness*, because those will certainly come, and they will come with much the less terror if we have thought of them before.

II. He applies himself to the young, and writes to them as children, to awaken them to think of death (v. 9, 10); here we have,

1. An ironical concession to the vanities and pleasures of youth: *Rejoice, O young man! in thy youth*. Some make this to be the counsel which the atheist and the epicure give to the young man, the poisonous suggestions against which Solomon, in the close of the verse, prescribes a powerful antidote. But it is more emphatic if we take it, as it is commonly understood, by way of irony, like that of Elijah to the priests of Baal (*Cry aloud, for he is a god*), or of Micaiah to Ahab (*Go to Ramoth-Gilead, and prosper*), or of Christ to his disciples, *Sleep on now*. “*Rejoice, O young man! in thy youth*, live a merry life, follow thy sports, and take thy pleasures; *let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth*, cheer thee with its fancies and foolish hopes; entertain thyself with thy pleasing dreams; *walk in the ways of thy heart*; do whatever thou hast a mind to do, and stick at nothing that may gratify the sensual appetite. *Quic-quid libet, licet* — *Make thy will thy law*. *Walk in the ways of thy heart*, and let thy heart walk after *thy eyes*, a rambling heart after a roving eye; what is pleasing in thy own eyes do it, whether it be pleasing in the eyes of God or no.” Solomon speaks thus ironically to the young man to intimate,

(1.) That this is that which he would do, and which he would fain have leave to do, in which he places his happiness and on which he sets his heart.

(2.) That he wishes all about him would give him this counsel, would prophesy to him such smooth things as these, and cannot brook any advice to the contrary, but reckons those his enemies that bid him be sober and serious.

(3.) To expose his folly, and the great absurdity of a voluptuous vicious course of life. The very description of it, if men would see things entirely, and judge of them impartially, is enough to show how contrary to reason those act that live such a life. The very opening of the cause is enough to determine it, without any argument.

(4.) To show that if men give themselves to such a course of life as this it is just with God to give them up to it, to abandon them to their own heart's lusts, that they may *walk in their own counsels*, ^{301E}Hosea 4:7.

2. A powerful check given to these vanities and pleasures: “*Know thou that for all these things God shall bring thee into judgment, and duly consider that, and then live such a luxurious life if thou canst, if thou darest.*” This is a *kolasterion* — a corrective to the foregoing concession, and plucks in the reins he had laid on the neck of the young man's lust. “*Know then, for a certainty, that, if thou dost take such a liberty as this, it will be thy everlasting ruin; thou hast to do with a God who will not let it go unpunished.*” Note,

(1.) There is a judgment to come.

(2.) We must every one of us be brought into judgment, however we may now put far from us that evil day.

(3.) We shall be reckoned with for all our carnal mirth and sensual pleasures in that day.

(4.) It is good for all, but especially for young people, to know and consider this, that they may not, by the indulgence of their youthful lusts, *treasure up unto themselves wrath against that day of wrath*, the wrath of the Lamb.

3. A word of caution and exhortation inferred from all this, v. 10. Let young people look to themselves and manage well both their souls and their bodies, their heart and their flesh.

(1.) Let them take care that their minds be not lifted up with pride, nor disturbed with anger, or any sinful passion: *Remove sorrow, or anger, from thy heart*; the word signifies any disorder or perturbation of the mind. Young people are apt to be impatient of check and control, to vex and fret at any thing that is humbling and mortifying to them, and their proud hearts rise against every thing that crosses and contradicts them. They are so set upon that which is pleasing to sense that they cannot bear any thing that is displeasing, but it goes with sorrow to their heart. Their pride often disquiets them, and makes them uneasy. “Put that away, and the love of the world, and lay thy expectations low from the creature, and then disappointments will not be occasions of sorrow and anger to thee.” Some by sorrow here understand that carnal mirth described v. 9, the end of which will be bitterness and sorrow. Let them keep at a distance from every thing which will be sorrow in the reflection.

(2.) Let them take care that their bodies be not defiled by intemperance, uncleanness, or any fleshly lusts: “*Put away evil from the flesh*, and let not the members of thy body be instruments of unrighteousness. The evil of sin will be the evil of punishment, and that which thou art fond of, as good for the flesh, because it gratifies the appetites of it, will prove evil, and hurtful to it, and therefore put it far from thee, the further the better.”

III. The preacher, to enforce his admonition both to old and young, urges, as an effectual argument, that which is the great argument of his discourse, the vanity of all present things, their uncertainty and insufficiency.

1. He reminds old people of this (v. 8): *All that comes is vanity*; yea, though *a man live many years and rejoice in them all*, All that has come already, and all that is yet to come, how much soever men promise themselves from the concluding scenes, it is all *vanity*. What will be will do no more to make men happy than what has been. *All that come* into the world are *vanity*; they are altogether so, at their best estate.

2. He reminds young people of this: *Childhood and youth are vanity*. The dispositions and actions of childhood and youth have in them a great deal of impertinence and iniquity, sinful vanity, which young people have need to watch against and get cured. The pleasures and advantages of childhood

and youth have in them no certainty, satisfaction, nor continuance. They are passing away; these flowers will soon wither, and these blossoms fall; let them therefore be knit into good fruit, which will continue and abound to a good account.