

LITTLE FOXES SPOIL THE VINES

"Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes." Song of Solomon 2:15.

My text is found in a portion of Scripture which is seldom read and is easily misunderstood. This book contains the story of a young woman who was betrothed to a shepherd. The shepherd's claim upon the girl was challenged by another who was Solomon the king. Solomon offered her every possible inducement to become his bride and thus one of his harem. She was captured and taken to the palace where the king poured out his heart to her but always without success. Through all of her trial, this young woman sustained herself by constant thoughts of her shepherd-lover. She imagined he was close to her side, and she constantly bore her witness concerning him. So effective was her testimony and so beautiful that the women of the harem desired to see her lover. "Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? whither is thy beloved turned aside? that we may seek him with thee" (Song of Solomon 6:1).

The context indicates that the young woman of the story had spoken of the clefts and the rocks where her shepherd-lover might be tending his flocks, then in retrospection she quotes the words of her brothers when they made her the keeper of the vineyards. This they did because they were opposed to her betrothal. They did all they knew to break up the engagement and hustled their sister off to the fields where she would be away from the one to whom she had promised herself. She was kept busy trying to catch the little foxes that would spoil the vines and eat the luscious grapes. It was necessary to catch the little foxes that would spoil the vines and eat the luscious grapes. It was necessary to catch the little foxes, but it was a difficult thing to do. They were shy creatures which came forth only at night and would do great damage to the vineyards. They were exceedingly fond of grapes.

Into this cheerful love song is inserted a caution against "the little foxes that spoil the vines." These small animals evidently crept through the little openings in the hedges or fences which enclosed the vineyards and damaged the vines with their sharp teeth and devoured the grapes of which they were particularly fond before they were ripe.

In the Song of Solomon the religious life is portrayed metaphorically. The grapes are the fruit of the godly life, and the little foxes are the sins which destroy the fruits. There are little foxes which deprive the vine of spiritual strength and rob the life of growth, beauty and fruitfulness. These little creatures must be trapped and destroyed ere we can enter into and fully enjoy fellowship with our Lord. I call upon you to beware of the little foxes which spoil the tender grapes in your lives.

Little foxes and tender grapes may not seem very important to you, yet the value of little things is incalculable. I would remind you that the greatest events in history have hinged upon incidents so small as to seem insignificant. The fate of the Roman Empire once hung in the balance while Caesar debated whether or not he would cross the Rubicon. Great ships are turned with small helms. Great planes are controlled by small instruments. Huge fires are started by small flames. One statement may turn a soul toward heaven or hell. An acorn is a little thing, but the black bear and his family live in the oak which springs from it. A kiss is a little thing, but it betrayed the Son of God into the hands of His enemies. Faith is a little thing, but when it is centered in Christ it results in our salvation through God's marvelous grace. So, when we talk about little foxes and tender grapes, do not imagine that we are dealing with something unworthy of most careful consideration. Continually the little foxes are at work on the tender grapes of our lives. The fruits of the Christian life are delicate and are easily destroyed. The world about us is full of little foxes that are constantly seeking to destroy these fruits.

Our need is for protection from little foxes. Why not the big foxes? Surely they are more violent and more destructive than little foxes. Herein is a great truth which every Christian needs to consider carefully. The big foxes --- the heinous sins --- are largely absent from the lives of Christian people. It is comparatively easy for us to observe the commandments which have to do with the gutter sins. We are not in the habit of stealing, nor of committing adultery, nor of killing. These are the big foxes, and our vineyards are free of them. But the little foxes present a real threat to the Christian's vineyard. They come stealthily, unheralded and unannounced. They are clever in their quietness and satanic in their subtlety. They destroy the fruit of the Christian life before one is aware of their presence. Because no vineyard is entirely free from these little foxes, by God's grace we need to build more sturdy fences of faith to protect our vineyards from these enemies. If we fail to do so, they will spoil the harvest of character and life.

There are various reasons why the little foxes should be caught. Being small, they are apt to be overlooked. If so, they will go on doing untold damage. If we do not kill them while they are young, they will become big foxes. It is easier to catch and destroy them now than in the distant future.

What are some of the little foxes which interfere with the proper spiritual growth and imperil the best interests of the Christian?

I. Disappointment.

This sly little fox tries to tell us that there is something wrong with our Christian experiences and lives if they are not all sunshine. He tries to tell us that the Christian life never has cloudy days. He misinterprets for us the meaning of the disappointments which come from time to time. But when we realize that disappointments are often sent by the loving Father to teach us lessons, to strengthen us and to give us more stamina, then the little fox of disappointment slinks away and does not damage us very much.

II. Selfishness.

A selfish person cannot see why he should help others; nobody helps him. He thinks everyone should look out for himself. Selfishness in the life makes the "me" in us vocal. "Give me some!" "Let me have the best!" This is a distressing condition, a sign that something has gone wrong with the love fruit. It indicates that self is on the throne of the life and the flesh is too much in control. Where that condition exists Christ has been pushed aside. Such a condition calls for drastic and painful surgery. Truly, unselfishness is one of the tender fruits of any Christ-like character.

III. Pride.

This haughty fox is very fond of himself and his appearance. He slips into our vineyard through the open gate, if he can, so he will not soil his soft fur by crawling under the fence. And what tremendous damage this fox can do! Pride is bad in the life of any person, but it is tragic in the life of a Christian who professes to reflect the spirit of Christ. Pride and Christian humility are irreconcilable. Some people are proud of their Christian witness, but just as soon as they become proud they destroy the witness.

There is a difference between pride and self-respect. We are not to despise ourselves, for we must remember that Christ considered us worth His dying for us. But whatever we are or have is the result of God's grace, and therefore it is no cause

for pride. God's Word warns, "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." The little fox of pride must be kept away from the tender grapes of Christian witness.

IV. Bitterness.

This sly little fox must be resisted at all costs. A nurse in a mission hospital once complained to the Christian doctor in charge that she had been treated rudely by certain patients. "Thank God for that!" exclaimed the doctor. "What do you mean?" demanded the astonished nurse. "Why, if you are carrying a vessel and somebody knocks against you, you can only spill out of the vessel what is inside; and when people misjudge and persecute us, we can only spill what is inside. In the case of a godless man, he will probably swear. But, if you are filled with the Spirit of God, you will manifest the gentleness of Christ, and astonish men. You will witness nobly for Him." The nurse saw the lesson and profited by it.

V. Desecration of the Lord's Day.

God has a claim upon our time as well as upon our strength and our money. Many of God's children are loafing away their Sundays in trying to satisfy themselves. Their church and its claims mean nothing to them. If the rest of the members of their church did what many professing Christians are doing so far as Sunday conduct is concerned, what would become of their church?

Years ago just after the workmen had completed the great power station at Niagara Falls, which supplies power and light to Buffalo and other cities in western New York, there was a flash of light of unusual brightness one night and then utter darkness. Linemen were sent out to discover the cause. They followed the line for quite some distance and finally one lineman discovered a black object lying across the wires. Upon climbing the pole he discovered the body of a cat. Wandering about in its nightly prowling, the cat had put one foot on one wire and another foot on another wire and the current was short-circuited by means of the animal's body. The cat was burned to a crisp but the community was plunged into darkness. It was only a little thing but grave results followed. How many lives are short-circuited so far as a right influence is concerned by reason of the desecration of the Lord's Day!

VI. Being too busy.

We hear it over and over -- too busy to teach a Sunday School class, too busy to call on newcomers, too busy to go to see the sick, too busy to win souls to Christ. Many seem to think they can serve God by proxy so they make a small contribution to the church occasionally and let the matter rest there. Paul has reminded us that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Then, if we spend our time in idleness, we are denying the very purpose for which we have been saved. If we are too busy to serve the Master, then we are too busy. Speedy adjustments ought to be made. Mr. J. C. Penney, one of the really big business men of our nation, said, "If anybody is too busy to go to church on Sunday morning and Sunday evening and to prayer meeting on Wednesday evening, he has too much business and is too busy."

VII. Unconfessed sin.

God calls for the confession of sin. The reason is that sin is against God. The Psalmist said, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Psalm 51:4). It is very easy for us to excuse ourselves and perhaps go so far as to try to justify our evil course, but God's Word teaches us to acknowledge our transgressions, and to admit that we have sinned against God. There is but one

thing wrong in every heart, every home, every community and every land and that is sin. "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23). The story is told of a baker living in a village not far from Quebec who bought his butter from a neighboring farmer. One day the baker became suspicious that the butter was not of the same weight, and therefore decided to satisfy himself about it. For several days he weighed the butter, and found that the rolls of butter which the farmer brought were gradually diminishing in weight. This angered him so that he had the farmer arrested. "I presume you have weights," said the judge. "No sir," replied the farmer. "How then do you manage to weigh the butter that you sell?" "That's easily explained, your honor," said the farmer. "When the baker commenced buying his butter from me, I thought I would get bread from him, and it is the one pound loaf I've been using as a weight for the butter I sell. If the weight of the butter is wrong, he has himself to blame."

Little sins are real sins, just as a little fox is a real fox. Little sins always prepare the way for big ones, and they form the habit of sin. Be on the alert and watch for the little foxes that spoil the tender grapes of Christian character. Catch them and slay them before they do their mischief.

Prayer helps here tremendously. It opens the doors and windows of personality to the love of God and His wholesome truth. Another great help in this realm is the urgent matter of repairing the gaps in the hedge or fence regularly in the act of public worship.