

# The Little Foxes

## Lesson 1 – Keeper of the Vineyards

**Song of Solomon 1:6 KJV** Look not upon me, because I *am* black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; *but* mine own vineyard have I not kept.

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

### I. INTRODUCTION—EVERYONE HAS A VINEYARD

Every person has a vineyard. We may not perceive that we are keepers of vineyards but there are responsibilities that we all have for our vineyards. First, we have the personal vineyard of our own soul. It is perhaps the most important vineyard of all that we are to take the most care of. Our soul is the most valuable possession that we have according to the Word of the Lord (Matthew 16:26; 10:28; Ecclesiastes 12:7). The care of the soul is a very tedious and challenging process. It involves the careful work of plowing, planting, cultivating, weeding, watering, and harvesting. Just as a farmer is in a joint venture with God, to care for our soul will have to be a joint venture with God. We cannot do it all alone! We must have God to intervene with Spirit and Word to accomplish His will for us.

The care of the soul is not something that will be accomplished with a single attempt but rather it is an ongoing process that takes years of constant devotion. It is a process that can be called holiness or sanctification (Luke 1:74-75; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 4:24; Heb. 12:14; 2 Peter 3:11). There will be ups-and-downs with the walk of holiness and yet we are to constantly strive to be pleasing to God (Php. 3:14; Romans 6:1-12; 8:1-10). We must not let self-righteousness or self-reliance get in our way of caring for our souls.

The second vineyard that we have a responsibility for is that of our family. It is one of the most challenging vineyards to care for in our times. The family has been under the attack of the devil since the first family who lived in the Garden of Eden. He refuses to let the family rest from his attacks. When the children of Israel were about to go into the Promised Land, God felt it important enough that

He would give Moses some advice to pass on to the Israelites concerning the vineyard of the family. They were about to go into another pagan culture just as Jacob and his sons had been transferred to Egypt. They had been slaves, then wanderers, and now they were conquerors but God still required a level of devotion to them.

In Deuteronomy 6 there are a few principles laid out that help us to see how we are to care for the vineyard of our families.

- **Deuteronomy 6:1-5**—The parents had to have a deep love and reverence for God.
- **Deuteronomy 6:6-7**—The parents had to make sure that there was a constant, conscious, and consistent transfer of truth. (The word “diligently” in 6:7 means to sharpen. In the Hebrew, this word would signify the idea “You are to intensely sharpen your sons!” This kind of instruction is not passive but it is aggressively active and it will require attention, time, and effort for it to be accomplished.)
- **Deuteronomy 6:10-14**—The parents had to make sure that they did not fall into the traps that are often laid by prosperity. From a wilderness of manna and quail to a land of milk and honey which defines the possibility of falling to the snare of materialism. This is only overcome when there is a constant element of gratitude and humility in one’s heart.
- **Deuteronomy 6:20-25**—The parents had to frequently and regularly remind themselves of God’s faithfulness and grace.

The third vineyard that we find ourselves having to take care of is the church. If you have been converted and have experienced the New Birth comprised of repentance, water baptism by immersion in Jesus Name, and have received the Holy Ghost with the initial sign of speaking with tongues, you have a responsibility to help with the vineyard of the church. Obviously pastors and spiritual leaders are the primary directors of the role of taking care of the vineyard but the fact remains that we all have a part to play in it.

To take care of the vineyard of the church we find four priorities in Acts 2:42 that sum up everything we must do. They were devoted to learning—*they learned the Apostle’s doctrine*. They were devoted to fellowship—*they loved each other*. They were devoted to worship—*they gave themselves to prayer*. All of

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these things working together served as an excellent foundation for the early church to take off and accomplish incredible things for the Lord.

## II. THE INDICTMENT OF THE SLUGGARD'S VINEYARD

**Song of Solomon 1:6 KJV** . . . they made me the keeper of the vineyards; *but mine own vineyard have I not kept.*

The utterance of the Shulamite in this verse proves to us the perils that exist in the confines of the Christian life. There are responsibilities that we have but often do not live up to them. It makes for a wearying journey that is filled with doubt, discouragement, and a knowledge that our spiritual walk could be on a much higher plain. This vineyard keeper is voicing a sorrowful confession of how things really are as she looks about the disarray of the vineyard.

How many times on our knees in prayer have we confessed the very same thing to the Lord? We have confessed about the faulty, shoddy spiritual work that has been accomplished because of the condition of our own soul. We know what it is like to have wanted to speak words of faith and hope into someone's torn up life only to discover the emptiness of our own soul. In moments like this often lips often outrun our devotion. Truth is declared but it is somewhat empty of passion. We have told of the love of Christ with the deep-seated knowledge that we have not yet attained to what we are speaking of.

We can only be reminded of the condition of the sluggard's vineyard that is laid out in the Proverbs for us:

**Proverbs 24:30-34 KJV** I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; **[31]** And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, *and* nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. **[32]** Then I saw, *and* considered *it* well: I looked upon *it*, *and* received instruction. **[33]** Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: **[34]** So shall thy poverty come *as* one that travelleth; and thy want as an armed man.

The condition of this vineyard was a likely picture of this man's soul. The ground no longer grew grapes that could provide an income for him but instead

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was overtaken with thorns and nettles. Every piece of ground will yield something whether it is weeds, thorns, and nettles or good fruit and good crops. The difference in these two outcomes rests solely on the keeper of the vineyard. Your own soul, your family, and your church are all going to produce some kind of crop it depends in great measure whether we are willing to invest in the spiritual opportunities that are afforded to us. If you leave it alone then nothing good will come from it but if you are willing to work diligently at it, you will be amazed at the work God does with our own efforts.

The Proverb also gives us a picture of a wall that had been broken down. We see that the keeper of the vineyard was lazy, had no understanding, valued sleep and leisure more than his treasure, and he ended up being robbed by his low level of vigilance. When walls get torn down through neglect there are boundaries that are erased and protection disappears. The erosion of the land can take place when the walls are removed. All of these conditions work against the production of a positive spiritual direction in life.

Broken down walls are places the little foxes came through and destroyed the crop. It only took one season to do it but that one season was enough. Walls of doctrine, principle, prayer, character, corporate worship and reading the Word of God are things that sustain the crop in our soul, our families, and our churches.

### **III. HOW VINEYARDS ARE KEPT**

We have seen how the lazy man attends to his vineyard and it leads to the ruin of it. Now we have to consider some things to look to take care of our own vineyards and we will notice that the overall arching purpose of keeping a vineyard is the condition of our own soul. If the care of our own soul is attended to; our families and our churches will ultimately take care of themselves.

#### **A. The Condition of the Soil**

The keeper of a physical vineyard always knows the condition of the soil that he is working with. If the soil is too light or too heavy, too moist or too dry, too acid or too alkaline, too poor or too rich, there are things that can be done to make it more ideal for whatever he is trying to grow. Once the diagnosis of the soil is determined the keeper then sets about to correct whatever deficiencies that are present.

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It may require that rocks are dug out, irrigation or drainage ditches added; lime added, topsoil brought in, and fertilizer to be broadcast. If there are problems with erosion, he may have to plant grasses or shrubs along the border of the vineyard to protect the soil. If there is a problem with erosion being created by wind, he may have to put up some windbreaks to keep the soil from being blown into ridges. If the conditions are favorable, he may even have to plant a covering of grass so it will anchor in the soil so the vineyard can prosper.

If the keeper discovers that his soil is too shallow, he may have to resort to plowing deeper so that the topsoil can be mixed with the deeper unused soil. In the process of this deeper plowing the keeper has the opportunity to mix in organic material, fertilizer, and other things that will help it to be more prosperous.

One of the more prominent parables of the Lord was that of the sower, the seed, and the soils. The sower had to contend with four different types of soil. The emphasis of the parable is not on the character of the sower, the quality of the seed but the condition of the soil.

**Mark 4:1-9 KJV** And he began again to teach by the sea side: and there was gathered unto him a great multitude, so that he entered into a ship, and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land. [2] And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine, [3] Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow: [4] And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. [5] And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: [6] But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. [7] And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. [8] And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred. [9] And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

The character of the hearer has a great impact on the effect of how the Word will work. In care of our soul, it is very important that we give ourselves to state of profitable hearing. It is very rare, in fact almost never, that we have

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heard anyone address us as to how to receive the Word of God. Some may lament the fact that great preaching has fallen away but we have to also note that for great preaching to take place, great hearing has to accommodate it. In listening to sermons and Bible studies, I think that we can improve the soil if we actively do some of these things.

- **First, meditate on God's Word every day.** We are a Bible rich society but I have come to discover that just because they are everywhere does not necessarily translate into us reading them. You really can't expect to be hungry for the Word on Sunday if you have not been reading it during the week. Richard Baxter said, "Read and meditate on the Holy Scriptures much in private, and then you will be the better able to understand what is preached on it in public."
  - **Second, pray throughout the week.** Prayer is very crucial to help us to hunger for the Word. If you will ask God to give you the ability to hear and pursue the Word, He will! Ask the Lord to turn the lights on in your mind and the Bible will explode in your life. Suddenly what your pastor is preaching will begin to fall into place and you will begin to see what real spiritual life is all about.
  - **Third, confess your sin.** For those who think they are not sinning, let me follow you around for about a week. If you are not praying, you are sinning. If you are not evangelizing, you are sinning. What about those websites, movies, books, or conversations that you are actively involved in that are not encouraging Godly and clean living? What about you're comments on Facebook or the forums that you are a part of? Are all of those Facebook polling questions that provide a characterization of you something that God would be pleased with? When you plow through Romans 6, 7, and 8, you will immediately discover that the American culture is constantly pulling at us and it is deadly to our spiritual life. All of those things obstruct our vision of God and His Word. That is sin and it calls for repentance.
  - **Fourth, reduce your media intake.** I am constantly fighting over this very lonely battlefield. I often think I am a lone voice crying out against this. The average American watches TV just over 4 hours a day. But we can't stand sermons over 30 minutes! That speaks to our priorities! Ken Ramey writes in his book, *Expository Listening*, "After TV watching and going to the movies and surfing the Internet all week long, you come to church and have
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to sit and listen to a lengthy sermon that requires a great deal of concentration and exertion you aren't used to. You're expected to go from being a passive viewer to an aggressive listener literally overnight." A final quote from Jay Adams: "Many today drift into church with their minds turned off, slouch in the pew, and expect the preacher to do the rest. Examine yourself, brother or sister: have you been guilty of becoming a Sunday morning version of the couch potato?"

- **Fifth, be consistent with church attendance.** Haphazard church attendance is an Achilles heel for many Christians in our times. They do not even realize what they have missed after they start having sporadic patterns of attending church. When we assemble together for a time of fellowship and encouragement it helps all of us (Hebrews 10:23-25). When I was growing up, my parents attended church every time the doors were open, so this habit became ingrained into my life and it has continued to reward great benefits to me. When you are regularly attending church, God has the ability to pick up where you left off from the last time. Not only do I feel that weekends are important for corporate worship, I am also a strong advocate of coming to mid-week services.
  - **Sixth, fight off distractions.** There are a thousand and one distractions that one can find attractive in the course of a worship service. You can watch people, you can look at the sanctuary, you can day-dream, and the sky is the limit as to what distractions you can pay attention to. Most of us have been in a class before whose intent it was to prep us for taking a final or a board examination. Nobody had to tell you to get focused and pay attention because you were fearful of failing the test. It's funny but sad how we can put much more effort in paying attention for some earthly examination we want to pass but pay little attention to the words that can help us to gain eternal life. You can fight off distractions by making eye contact with the preacher. You can mentally follow along with what he is saying and you can physically follow along in your Bible. Don't give in to laziness by leaving your Bible at home, take it to church! By the way, sermons are not for entertainment, they are for instruction in righteousness and sometimes the Word will confront where you are living and it will convict you. If you are living low, the tendency is to get angry with the preacher but if you are living high, spiritually speaking, you will embrace the biblical message and determine to do better after you repent and confess your sin to God.
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Great hearing is indispensable to great preaching. It is also indispensable to the cultivation of good soil in the life of the hearer. We must guard against preventing the truth to gain an access to our soul. We need to avoid the shallow impulsiveness of emotionalism that responds quickly and immediately with feelings but the will never gets involved in the matter. Feelings are fleeting but it is necessary for the will to be involved for those who are going to bear a cross. We have to be careful that our response is not soon choked out by the things that men around us deem to be important.

## **B. The Control of Weeds**

The keeper of the vineyard also has to keep a watchful eye for those weeds, thistles, nettles, briars, and scrub trees that will exploit his soil. These kinds of things take the plant food and the water and consume them at the expense of the vines. All of these things have to be entirely removed from the vineyard or else. Cultivation is the most effective way to accomplish this as it stirs the soil and shaves off the roots just below the surface of the ground. Cultivation also works as a deterrent against various forms of fungus and bacteria that will deform the vines.

In the parable of the soils, we are told that some of the seed fell to the ground among the thorns (Mark 4:7, 18-19). We are told that the thorns are the cares of this world. It is those worries about secular things instead of the sacred things. Some of the cares of this life are the necessary things that relate to our survival on the earth. Food, clothing, work and other matters are involved in these things. We have certain responsibilities that are given to us and really at their core they could be considered gifts from God. Food, clothing, and even work are gifts of God that He has given to us to help us to function in life. However the great deception from the devil is for us to turn those gifts into idols. They become idols to us when they are all consuming to the extent that God is entirely squeezed out of the picture in our material pursuits of them. This is when the weeds will begin to rage out of control.

The cares of this life soon become what we are desperate to attain to because they can bring affluence in this world and attention from those who are around us. The capture of these things can bring elements of pride, ambition,

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control, and self-gratification that lead to us thinking of much higher than what we really are. Soon these very cares of life choke out all of our spiritual life to the degree that we may not even recognize it.

The other definition of the thorns was noted as the deceitfulness of riches. Jesus noted to His disciples that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to make it to heaven (Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). Some have attempted to say this meant that there was a small entry way into the walls of Jerusalem so that the man who had a heavy laden camel could not make it through. The camel would supposedly kneel on his knees and crawl through the passageway but could not make it through with all of the saddles and goods attached. Nowhere can this be documented with accuracy and has to be confined as to one of the fancies that men have sometimes attempted to construct concerning Scripture. I believe that this Scriptural reference is to be taken literally.

Riches may be a blessing to some but to the vast majority they are a detriment toward salvation. Money can purchase a lot of things in this life but it can never purchase peace of mind, contentment of heart, and a host of spiritual virtues. In fact, the mad pursuit of wealth often destroys the spiritual virtues that we so desperately need to live for God.

Money may even cause us to distrust the providence of God and the way that He moves about in our lives. There are times where the pursuit of wealth may cause one to violate the most basic of Christian principles as we have been made well aware of in our own community in the last couple of years. The pursuit of money creates a vacuum of greed that gives in vain desires, unreasonable expectations, and maddening exertions of the will. The pursuit of money also predisposes us to covetousness which is a sin. Just from these few examples it is easy to see how the weeds can choke out the work of the Word and Spirit in our hearts.

Robert Burns, the famous poet, occasionally had times of serious reflection of the state of his soul. He recorded one of those times when he compared himself to the review of his past life. He wrote that he was like a lonely man walking amidst the ruins of a vast and noble temple. The walls were strewn about and the pillars were cast askew. The elaborate marble floors were cracked and

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between the cracks and around the whole building were choking, horrific weeds. He was in great alarm because he saw this as the picture of his own life.

In a very troubled state of mind, he sought out one of the popular ministers in his city. When he told him of his dream and how troubled he was about it, the society minister laughed and told him not to worry with such matters. All is well, so he said! He urged him to continue to dance at the balls, drown himself in the bowls of wine, and fly from these phantoms of his soul into the arms of pleasure. It was pleasant but fatal advice for Burns because he followed it and the “lusts of other things” entering into his heart choked out the Word.

**Thomas Brooks**—The snow covers many a dunghill, and so doth prosperity many a rotten heart. It is easy to wade in a warm bath, and every bird can sing on a sunshiny day.

**Thomas Brooks**—You gaze on my purple robe and golden crown, but did you know what cares are under it, you would not take it up from the ground to have it.

### **C. Pruning Is Necessary**

The keeper of the vineyard also is aware that pruning is a very necessary task that has to be carried out. Pruning is the removal of any branches or shoots to promote the overall health of the vine. There are a number of reasons that pruning needs to take place. There are some varieties of vines that need to be pruned immediately after the harvest in order to avoid having to work around the dead branches in the new season.

Pruning of these dead branches eliminates the disease spots or lesions that may have grown during a period of productivity. The wise keeper knows that he should burn the pruned branches for the most effective elimination of any parasite, lesion, or disease.

Pruning is also very effective in shaping the plant and causing new growth to be stimulated. It can help branches be more easily accessed by the harvester. It is particularly important with a vineyard of grapes that pruning take place so that the vines are not destroyed because of the weight of the yield. Additionally

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the keeper knows that if he does not prune some fruit-bearing branches that the overall quality of the grapes will be very limited.

Pruning is both stimulating and dwarfing to the plant. The plant is dwarfed because it has been greatly reduced in size. However, the stimulating process sets in almost immediately as the vine starts a rapid growth process that will strengthen it. Above the ground the plant may be dwarfed but below the ground the root system goes to work at expanding so that there is more water and nutrients available to vine as it bears a higher quality of fruit.

The pruning of the soul often comes in the form of divine chastisement. I trust that all of us at some point come under the favor of God's chastisement. There is nothing that promotes spiritual growth and maturity like the chastening hand of God.

**Hebrews 12:5-11 KJV** And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, **My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:** [6] For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. [7] If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? [8] But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. [9] Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected *us*, and we gave *them* reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? [10] For they verily for a few days chastened *us* after their own pleasure; but he for *our* profit, that *we* might be partakers of his holiness. [11] Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

We are pruned by the hand of God for a variety of reasons: Sinful habits that lead us into spiritual hardness; Carnality that rules us; Detours into worldliness; Stubbornness of spirit; and passions that get out of control. Our reaction to His hand says much about the maturity and motives of our soul.

- We should not despise or faint under the chastisements of the Lord.
  - We should not have contempt for the path we walk through during God's work on our soul.
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- If we have contempt for the pruning we will not gain any improvement from them.
- If we have contempt for the pruning it very well can open us up to even greater evils.
- It should develop in us a sense of humility and grace that will help us assist others in their time of need.
- It should cause us to develop habits of deep soul searching as to the cause for the chastisement.
- Be careful not to despise the chastening of the Lord by murmuring at it.
- Be careful not to despise the chastening by claiming that there is no use in it.
- Be careful not to despise the chastening of the Lord by thinking God is insulting us by the form it takes.
- Be careful not to despise the chastening of the Lord by not adapting and changing because of it.
- Be careful not to despise the chastening of the Lord by being extremely judgmental toward those who are undergoing the chastening work of God.
- Be careful that you do not faint by simply giving up during the process of God's correction.
- Be careful that you do not faint by doubting you are a child of God in the time of correction.
- Be careful that you do not faint by thinking you will never come out of the trouble.

All of these things are working in our behalf to save us.

**John 15:2-4 KJV** Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every *branch* that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. **[3]** Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. **[4]** Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

#### **D.     Watering**

The keeper of the vineyard never underestimates the old adage of “weeding, watering, and waiting” as a necessary part of the harvest. The vineyard that will make it is the one that has been well-watered. All have probably seen a

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time when plants were wilting down because of a lack of water. If you watered the wilting plant, it was amazing to see what took place in thirty-minutes or so after you had generously watered the plant. Water is essential to the life of the vineyard.

Watering takes place naturally with rainfall and it takes place artificially with the work of irrigation. The keeper of the vineyard becomes aware that just because the top of the ground may be wet is not necessarily a sign that the roots of the vine have been adequately taken care of. The more fruit that is on the vines, the more water will be required.

There has to be continual watering if we are to be fruitful in our walk with God and there are some clear reasons for it to be done. Watering gives us an opportunity for our understanding to become clearer about God. Watering advances our knowledge and confirms our faith. Watering promotes a sense of order in a vineyard in that the vines can grow uniformly and together so that the harvest may become more productive. Watering stirs our lives to a greater fruitfulness.

We must make sure that the watering takes place on a regular basis because the soil of the human heart is not conducive to spiritual growth without it. Temptation is much easier to overcome when the watering process is ongoing. Temptations come frequently to us and the attack has an ability to wilt and wither the good vines we do have. Therefore frequent watering helps us to overcome this terrible dryness of the soul that can take place. We note in 1 Corinthians 3:6 that Paul planted and Apollos watered and God gave the increase. We have to make the connection and know that if there are spiritual men who are working the vineyard, the devil has men planting and watering so that it will lead to the growth of sin and wickedness. Therefore water your soul with good and godly worship.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

There are other responsibilities that a vineyard keeper has to maintain to care for his vineyard. We shall see more of our responsibilities to keeping our vineyard and discovering who the little foxes are that work to destroy.

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