

The Unkept Vineyard—or, Personal Work Neglected

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A SERMON DELIVERED ON LORD'S DAY EVENING, SEPTEMBER 19, 1886,

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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

"They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept." Song of Solomon 1:6.

The text is spoken in the first person singular—"They made me." Therefore let the preaching, tonight, be personal to you, dear Friends—personal to the preacher, first, and then to each one of this mixed multitude. May we at this hour think less of others than of ourselves! May the sermon be of practical value to our own hearts! I do not suppose that it will be a pleasing sermon. On the other hand it may be a saddening one. I may bring unhappy memories before you, but let us not be afraid of that holy sorrow which is health to the soul. Since the spouse in this text speaks of herself, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept," let each one of us copy her example and think of ourselves.

The text is the language of complaint. We are all pretty ready at complaining, especially of other people. Not much good comes of picking holes in other men's characters and yet many spend hours in that unprofitable occupation! It will be well for us, at this time, to let our complaint, like that of the text, deal with ourselves. If there is something wrong at home, let the father blame himself. If there is something evil with the children, let the mother look to her own personal conduct as their instructor. Do not let us lend out our ears, but let us keep them at home for our own use. Let us clear out an open passage to the heart so that everything that is said shall go down into the spirit—and purify our inner man. Let us from the heart make the confession—"They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept."

Let us make the text practical. Do not let us be satisfied to have uttered the language of complaint, but let us get rid of the evils which we deplore. If we have been wrong, let us labor to be right. If we have neglected our own vineyard, let us confess it with due humiliation, but let us not continue to neglect it. Let us ask God that holy results may flow out of our self-lamentations so that before many days we may begin to keep our own vineyards carefully by the Grace of God! And then we shall better carry out the office of keeper of the vineyards of others, if we are called to such an employment.

There are two things upon which I am going to dwell at this time. The first is that there are many Christian people—I hope they are Christian people—who will be compelled to confess that the greater part of their life is spent in labor which is not of the highest kind

and is not properly their own. I shall point out the worker who has forgotten his heavenly calling. And when I have done with this case—and I am afraid that there will be much about it that may touch many of us—I shall then take a more general view and deal with any who are undertaking other works and neglecting their own proper vocation.

I. First, then, let me begin with THE CHRISTIAN WHO HAS FORGOTTEN HIS HIGH AND HEAVENLY CALLING. In the day when you and I were born again, my Brothers and Sisters, we were born for God. In the day when we saw that Christ died for us, we were bound, from that day on, to be dead to the world. In the day when we were quickened by the Holy Spirit into newness of life, that life was bound to be a consecrated one. For a thousand reasons it is true that, "You are not your own: you are bought with a price." The ideal Christian is one who has been made alive with a life which he lives for God. He has risen out of the dominion of the world, the flesh and the devil. He reckons that "if one died for all, then were all dead: and that He died for all, that they which live should not, from this day on, live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them and rose again." This you will not deny. Christian Friends, you admit that you have a high, holy and heavenly calling!

Now let us look back. We have not spent our life idly—we have been forced to be keepers of the vineyards. I hope I am not addressing anybody here who has tried to live without employment and labor of some kind. No, we have worked and we have worked hard. Most men speak of their wages as "hard-earned," and I believe that in many cases they speak the bare truth. Many hours in the day have to be spent upon our occupations. We wake up in the morning and think of what we have to do. We go to bed wearied at night by what we have done. This is as it should be, for God did not make us that we might sport and play like leviathan in the deep. Even in Paradise man was told to dress the garden. There is something to be done by each man and specially by each Christian.

Come back to what I began with. In the day when we were born again, as many of us as are new creatures in Christ Jesus, we began to live to God and not to ourselves. Have we carried out that life? We have worked, we have even worked hard—but the questions come to us—What have we worked for? Who has been our master? With what objective have we toiled? Of course, if I have been true to my profession as a Christian, I have lived and worked for God, for Christ, for the Kingdom of Heaven. But has it been so? And is it so now? Many are working very hard for wealth, which means, of course, for self, that they may be enriched. Some are working simply for compensation which means, if it goes no farther, still for self. Others work for their families, a motive good enough in its way, but still only an enlargement, after all, of
self.

To the Christian there must always be a far higher, deeper, purer, truer motive than self in its widest sense—or else the day must come when he will look back upon his life and say,

"They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard"—that is, the service of Christ, the Glory of Him that bought me with His blood—"have I not kept." It seems to me to be a terrible calamity to have to look back on 20 years and say, "What have I done in all those 20 years for Christ? How much of my energy has been spent in striving to glorify Him? I have had talents—how many of those talents have been used for Him who gave them to me? I have had wealth, or I have had influence. How much of that money have I spent distinctly for my Lord? How much of that influence have I used for the promotion of His Kingdom?" You have been busy with this notion and that motive and the other endeavor—but have you lived as you will wish to have lived when you stand at His right hand amidst His glories? Have you so acted that you will then judge yourself to have well lived when your Lord and Master shall come to call you to account?

Ask yourself, "Am I an earnest laborer together with God, or am I, after all, only a laborious trifler, an industrious doer of nothing, working hard to accomplish no purpose of the sort for which I ought to work, since I ought to live unto my Lord, alone?" I invite all my fellow servants, in retrospect, to see whether they have kept their own vineyards. I suppose that they have worked hard. I only put the question—Have they kept their own vineyards? Have they served the Lord in all things?

I am half afraid to go a step farther. To a very large degree we have not been true to our own professions—our highest work has been neglected—we have not kept our own vineyards. In looking back, how little time has been spent by us in communion with God! How little a part of our thoughts has been occupied with meditation, contemplation, adoration and other acts of devotion! How little have we surveyed the beauties of Christ—His Person, His work, His sufferings, His Glory! We say that it is, "Heaven below," to commune with Christ—but do we do it? We profess that there is no place like the Mercy Seat. How much are we at that Mercy Seat? We often say that the Word of God is precious—that every page of it glows with a heavenly light. Do we study it?

Friends, how much time do you spend upon it? I venture to say that the bulk of Christians spend more time in reading the newspaper than they do in reading the Word of God! I trust that I am too severe in this statement, but I am afraid, greatly afraid, that I am not. The last new book, perhaps the last sentimental story will win attentive reading, when the Divine, mysterious, unutterable depths of heavenly knowledge are disregarded by us. Our Puritan forefathers were strong men because they lived on the Scriptures. None stood against them in their day, for they fed on good meat, whereas their degenerate children are far too fond of unwholesome food! The chaff of fiction and the bran of the quarterlies are poor substitutes for the old corn of Scripture, the fine flour of spiritual Truths of God! Alas, my Brothers and Sisters, too many eat the unripe fruit of the vineyards of Satan—and the fruits of the Lord's vines they utterly despise!

Think of our neglect of our God and see whether it is not true that we have treated Him very evilly. We have been in the shop, we have been on the exchange, we have been at the markets, we have been in the fields, we have been in the pub-

lic libraries, we have been in the lecture room, we have been in the forum of debate—but our own closets and studies, our walk with God and our fellowship with Jesus—we have far too much neglected.

Moreover, we have too much left the vineyard of holy service for God to go to ruin. I would ask you—How about the work your God has called you to do? Men are dying—are you saving them? This great city is like a seething caldron, boiling and bubbling up with infamous iniquity—are we doing anything by way of antidote to the Hell-broth concocted in that caldron? Are we, indeed, a power working towards righteousness? How much good have we done? What have I done to pluck brands from the burning? What have I done to find the lost sheep for whom my Savior laid down His life? Come, put the questions and answer them honestly! No, do not back out and say, "I have no ability." I fear you have more ability than you will give an account of with joy at the Last Great Day! I remember a young man who complained that the little Church over which he presided was so small. He said, "I cannot do much good. I have not above 200 hearers." An older man replied, "Two hundred hearers are a great many to have to give an account of at the Last Great

Day."

As I came in at yonder door, this evening, and looked into these thousands of faces, I could not help trembling! How shall I answer for this solemn charge, for this enormous flock in that Last Great Day? You have all a flock of some kind, larger or smaller. You have all, as Christian people, somebody for whom you will have to answer. Have you done your Master's work in reference to those entrusted to you? O men and women, have you sought to save others from going down into the Pit? You have the Divine remedy—have you handed it out to these sick and dying ones? You have the heavenly Word of God which can deliver them from destruction—have you spoken it in their ears, praying all the while that God might bless it to their souls? Might not many among you say to himself, "I have been a tailor," or, "I have been a shop-keeper," or, "I have been a mechanic," or, "I have been a merchant," or, "I have been a physician, and I have attended to these callings—but my own vineyard, which was my Master's, which I was bound to look to first of all, I have not kept"?

Well, now, what is the remedy for this? We need not talk of our fault any more—let us make, each one, his own personal confession and then seek amendment. I believe the remedy is a very sweet one. It is not often that medicine is pleasant, but at this time I prescribe for you a charming potion. It is that you follow up the next verse to my text. Read it— "My own vineyard have I not kept. Tell me, O You whom my soul loves, where You feed, where You make your flock to rest at noon; for why should I be as one that turns aside by the flocks of Your companions?" Get to your Lord and in Him you will find recovery from your neglects!

Ask Him where He feeds His flock and go with Him! They have warm hearts who commune with Christ! They are prompt in duty who enjoy His fellowship!

I cannot help reminding you of what I have often spoken of, namely, our Lord's language to the Church at Laodicea. That Church had come to be so bad that He said, "I will spue you out of My mouth." And yet what was the remedy for that Church? "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." After supping with Christ you will not be lukewarm! Nobody can say, "I am neither cold nor hot" when they have been in His company! Rather they will enquire, "Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked with us by the way?" If there is an angel, as Milton sings, whose name is Uriel, who lives in the sun, I will guarantee you he is never cold! And He that lives in Christ and walks with Him is never cold, nor slow in the Divine service! Away to your Lord, then!

Hasten to your Lord and you will soon begin to keep your vineyard, for in the Song you will see a happy change effected. The spouse began to keep her vineyard, directly, and to do it in the best fashion. Within a very short time you find her saying, "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines." See, she is hunting out her sins and her follies! Farther on you find her with her Lord in the vineyard, crying, "Awake, O north wind and come, you south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out!" She is evidently keeping her garden and asking for heavenly influences to make the spices and flowers yield their perfume. She went down to see whether the vines flourished and the pomegranates budded. Soon, with her Beloved, she rises early to go to the vineyard and watch the growth of the plants! Farther on you find her talking about all manner of fruits that she has laid up for her Beloved. Thus you see that to walk with Christ is the way to keep your vineyard and serve your Lord. Come and sit at His feet! Lean on His bosom! Rest on His arm and make Him to be the joy of your spirit!

The Lord grant, dear Brothers and Sisters, that this gentle word which I have spoken as much to myself as to you, may be blessed to us all!

II. Now, I turn to the congregation in general and speak with THE MAN WHO IN ANY PLACE HAS TAKEN

OTHER WORK AND NEGLECTED HIS OWN. He can use the words of the text—"They make me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept."

We know many persons who are always doing a great deal and yet do nothing—fussy people, people to the front in every movement, persons who could set the whole world right, but are not right themselves. Just before a general election there is a manifestation of most remarkable men—generally persons who know everything and a few things besides, who, if they could but be sent to Parliament, would turn the whole world upside down and put even Pandemonium to rights! They would pay the National Debt within six months and do any other trifle that might occur to them. Very eminent men are these! I have come across

impossibly great men. None could be so great as these feel themselves to be. They are an order of very superior persons—reformers, or philosophers who know what nobody else knows, only, happily, they have not patented the secret and are prepared to tell it to others and, thereby, illuminate us all!

I suggest to our highly-gifted friends that it is possible to be looking after a great many things and yet to be neglecting your own vineyard. There is a vineyard that a great many neglect and that is their own heart. It is well to have talent; it is well to have influence; but it is better to be right within yourself. It is well for a man to see to his cattle and look well to his flocks and to his herds—but let him not forget to cultivate that little patch of ground that lies in the center of his being. Let him educate his head and intermeddle with all knowledge, but let him not forget that there is another plot of ground called the heart, the character, which is more important, still! Right principles are spiritual gold and he that has them and is ruled by them is the man who truly lives. He has not life, whatever else he has, who has not his heart cultivated and made right and pure.

Have you ever thought about your heart? Oh, I do not mean whether you have palpitations! I am no doctor. I am speaking now about the heart in its moral and spiritual aspect. What is your character and do you seek to cultivate it? Do you ever use the hoe upon those weeds which are so plentiful in us all? Do you water those tiny plants of goodness which have begun to grow? Do you watch them to keep away the little foxes which would destroy them? Are you hopeful that yet there may be a harvest in your character which God may look upon with approval? I pray that we may all look to our hearts. "Keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." Pray daily, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me," for if not, you will go up and down in the world and do a great deal—and when it comes to the end you will have neglected your noblest nature—and your poor starved soul will die that second death which is the more dreadful because it is everlasting death!

How terrible for a soul to die of neglect! How can we escape who neglect this great salvation? If we pay every attention to our bodies, but none to our immortal souls, how shall we justify our folly? God save us from suicide by neglect! May we not have to moan out eternally, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept!"

Now, pass over that point and think of another vineyard. Are not some people neglecting their families? Next to our hearts, our households are the vineyards which we are most bound to cultivate. I shall never forget a man whom I knew in my youth who used to accompany me, at times, in my walks to the villages to preach. He was always willing to go with me any evening, but I did not need to ask him, for he asked himself until I purposely put him off from it. He liked, also, to preach much better than others liked to hear him, but he was a man who was sure to be somewhere to the front if he could. Even if you snuffed him

out, he had a way of lighting himself up again. He was good-natured and irrepressible. He was, I believe, sincerely earnest in doing good. But two boys of his were well known to me and they would swear horribly. They were ready for every vice and were under no restraint. One of them drank himself into a dying state with brandy, though he was a mere boy. I do not believe his father had ever spoken to him about the habit of intoxication, though he certainly was sober and virtuous, himself. I had no fault to find with him except this grave fault—that he was seldom at home, was not master of the house and could not control his children. Neither husband nor wife occupied any place of influence in the household—they were simply the slaves of their children—their children made themselves vile and they restrained them not!

This Brother would pray for his children at the Prayer Meeting, but I do not think he ever practiced family prayer. It is shocking to find men and women speaking fluently about religion and yet their houses are a disgrace to Christianity! I suppose that none of you are as bad as that but, if it is so, please reread this text over—"They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept." The most careful and prayerful father cannot be held accountable for having wicked sons, if he has done his best to instruct them. The most anxious and tearful mother cannot be blamed if her daughter dishonors the family, provided her mother has done her best to train her up in the right way. But if the parents cannot say that they have done their best and their children go astray, then they are blameworthy. If any of them have come to the Tabernacle, tonight, and their boys and girls are—they do not know where—let them go home quickly and find them! If any of my hearers exercise no parental discipline, nor seek to bring their children to Christ, I do implore them to give up every kind of public work till they have first done their work at home! Has anybody made you a minister and are you not trying to save your own children? I tell you, Sir, I do not believe that God made you a minister, for if He had, He would have begun with making you a minister to your own family!

"They made me the keeper of the vineyards." "They" ought to have known better and you ought to have known better than to accept the call! How can you be a steward in the great household of the Lord when you cannot even rule your own house? A Sunday school teacher, teaching other people's children and never praying with her own? Is not this a sad business? A teacher of a large class of youths who never has taken a class of his own sons and daughters? Why, what will he do when he lives to see his children plunged into vice and sin and remembers that he has utterly neglected them? This is plain dealing, but I never wear gloves when I preach! I know not where this knife may cut, but if it wounds, I pray you, do not blunt its edge. Do you say that this is "very personal"? It is meant to be personal! And if anybody is offended by it, let him be offended with himself—and mend his ways. No longer let it be true of any of us, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept."

Besides that, every man who knows the Lord should feel that his vineyard lies, also, round about his own house. If God has saved your children, then, dear Friend, try to do something for your neighbors, for your employees, for those with whom you associate in daily labor. God has appointed you to take care of those nearest home. They say the cobbler's wife goes barefoot. Do not let it be true! Begin at home and go on with those nearest home. Manifest Christian love to your neighbors! It is a great pity that yonder Christian man, living in a very dark part of London, comes to the Tabernacle and does good in our societies but never speaks a word for Jesus in the court where he lives. Poor stuff, poor stuff, is that salt which is only salt when it is in the saltbox! Throw that kind of salt away! We want a kind of salt that begins to bite into any bit of meat it touches! Put it where you like, if it is good salt, it begins to operate upon that which is nearest to it!

Some people are capital salt in the box—they are also good in the cake—they are beautifully white to look at and you can cut them into ornamental shapes. But they are never used—they are merely kept for show. If salt does not preserve anything, throw it away! Ask the farmer whether he would like it for his fields. "No," he says, "there is no goodness in it." Salt that has no saltiness in it is of no use. You can make the garden path of it. It is good to be trod underfoot by men, but that is the only use to which you can put it. O my beloved fellow Christians, do not let it be said that you reside in a place to which you do no good whatever! I am sure if there were individual, personal work on the part of Christians in the localities where they reside, God the Holy Spirit would bless the unanimous action of His earnest, quickened Church and London would soon know that God has a people in the midst of it! If we keep away from the masses of souls—if we cannot think of laboring in a district because it is too low or too poor—we shall have missed our vocation and, at the last, we shall have to lament, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept."

You and I must cry mightily to the Holy Spirit to help us to live really and truly the lives which our professions demand of us. A day will come when all Church attendance, and Chapel attendance, preaching, singing and sacraments will seem fluff and useless stuff if there has not been the substance of real living for Christ in all our religiousness! Oh that we would awaken ourselves to something like a Divine earnestness! Oh that we felt the grandeur of our heavenly surroundings! We are no common people! We are loved with no common love! Jesus died for us! He died for us! He died for us! And is this poor life of ours, so often dull and worldly, our sole return? Behold that piece of land! He that bought it paid His life for it, watered it with bloody sweat and sowed in it a Divine Seed! And what is the harvest? We naturally expect great

things. Is the poor starveling life of many a professor a fit harvest for Christ's sowing His heart's blood? God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit—all in action—what

is the result? Omnipotence linking hands with love and working out a miracle of Grace! What comes of it?

A half-hearted professor of religion. Is this all the result? O Lord, was there ever so small an effect from so great a cause? You might almost need a microscope to discover the result of the work of Grace in some people's lives. Ought it to be so? Shall it be so? In the name of Him that lives and was dead, dare you let it be so? Help us, O God, to begin to live, and keep the vineyard which You, Yourself, have given to us to keep, that we may render in our account, at last, with joy and not with grief! Amen.