

Bethel

Pulpit

Keeping Our Own Vineyards

Sermon Number 462

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 10th January, 2010**

Text: *"They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept" (Song 1. 6).*

Many years ago when I lived in Haslingden, late one evening there was a knock at the door, and when I opened it a lady was standing there. I do not think I had ever met her before, but I knew of her. She was a very nice, very refined person. I had heard that this lady had recently joined a most exclusive denomination of Christians. So I asked her in and asked her what she wanted. She said she was in trouble. I said, "How can I help you?" She said that in the church she had joined – I was not sure whether it was just a new member or whether it was all the members, but they had been given a piece of Scripture and they were told they had to give an exposition on exactly what it meant. This dear lady had been given this word I have just read to you now: "They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept." She said, "I can't make any sense or reason of it." I think she said it was the next day she had to give an account of this verse, and what kind of strictness or discipline, how they ordered things, I do not know, but she was in trouble. So to the best of my knowledge I tried to tell her what I believe this verse means. She went away happily. What the sequel was, I never did hear, but I have thought about this verse ever since. I have never spoken from it; I have never heard anyone else speak from it.

"They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept." Let us be clear, the comparison here is very telling, very striking, very simple. Here is this person. It seems she has a lovely little vineyard of her own. For some reason she is appointed to look after a lot of other vineyards, and it seems she was looking after those other vineyards wonderfully well, and they were very prosperous, very fruitful, but she just had not time to bother with her own and her own had just grown wild, over-run with thorns and briars and thistles. So it is a very striking comparison. A lot of its meaning immediately appears in ordinary life. We see it on

every side: a person being so bothered about other things and neglecting the things that matter; some mothers who are so taken up with their secular employment that their home and their children are neglected; some fathers who spend so much time enjoying their own hobbies and pastimes that they have not much time for their wife and their children. So we might go on and on like this: neglecting your own vineyard, but not neglecting the vineyards of other people. Some who are so interested in charity, this charity and another charity, and perhaps there are some aged relatives or some who are afflicted who are forgotten, who are neglected.

There is a principle here, and really it is a principle that affects all of us in some way, at some time. Of course, it comes into the things of God. I saw it in my early days. Perhaps a most godly, gracious minister spending so much time travelling about the country, dearly loved, his ministry blessed, and yet his own congregation languishing, difficulties, problems, errors coming in. That is one reason why when I came to Bethel, I felt it right always to put Bethel first and stay at home as much as I could, and why I have never gone about as much as many other people.

There is a principle here. A person can even be engaged in good things, excellent, wonderful things. That is why I read to you concerning dear Martha of Bethany. She was bothered about other people's vineyards, in the spirit of this verse, and she was neglecting her own. She had a solemn shock when the Lord Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." So a person can be engaged in all kinds of good work and yet come under the condemnation of this verse.

I remember when I was young Mr. F.L. Rowell telling me of a most sad case which had come to his notice, and it was of a woman who was very highly esteemed, counted to be an outstanding Christian. She was greatly admired, and she was counted very godly. She was a very able woman. Her husband was just, as you would say, an ordinary sort of man. When he came home from work there would be no dinner, and a little note, gone out to a Committee of such a society. The next day, gone away to preside at a meeting; gone away to speak at a meeting of ladies; and another, gone away to do hospital visiting. And Mr. Rowell said one day she came home and

the poor man had sadly written, “I too have gone away.” She did not see him again.

But you see the principle here. “They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.” In one sense, everybody’s heart is like a vineyard. I say that with qualifications and advisedly, but how many people are so busy with things in the world, things in their work, things in their family, things in their business, and they neglect the concerns of their never-dying soul? May it not be so here. It is a busy life, it is a busy world, “But seek ye *first* the kingdom of God.” She was not putting her own vineyard first. She was neglecting it. Now your soul’s concerns should always come first, and following that, the concerns of the church of God. “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

“They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.” Well really this morning, introducing the subject, opening it up, I have been going round in all kinds of things. Now I want to come to the vital point here this morning, and it is this: all the people of God, their soul is as a vineyard which they are commanded to keep. If your religion is real, God has made your heart into a vineyard, and you have that command to keep it, and that second command, that though there are things which are good and right and lawful, they must never interfere with the keeping of your own vineyard. What did we read this morning? “Keep thy heart with all diligence.” You need to be watchful how you spend your time. It needs to be your chief concern. “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.”

“They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.” If there were any ministers here this morning, as I had a few at Southill on Tuesday evening, I would enlarge on this, because in one sense it does especially affect gospel ministers, because the divines down the ages have been plagued with it and I have myself. Perhaps you are sitting in your study and a word comes, and what is your reaction? That would be a good text for next Sunday morning, when it should be, What has it to do with me? That is being a “keeper of the vineyards, but mine own vineyard have I not kept.” If there were ministers here, I would enlarge on this point.

“They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.” Now how is the believer’s heart a vineyard? A vineyard is a fruitful place. It has been hedged off. It has been separated. There is a purpose. The ground has been prepared. The vines are planted. And there should be the bringing forth of fruit. By nature our hearts are a barren wilderness, but in the new birth the Lord fences off our heart and then He prepares it. He prepares the ground, and there are things planted there, and there will be a bringing forth of fruit in greater or less measure to eternal life. Of course, the fruits of a vineyard are things like the tender, holy fear of God, reverence for His name, living desires. All these are fruits on the vine. These are the fruits of the vineyard: real prayer – “Give me Christ, or else I die”; love to the Saviour, love to His people, love to His house, love to His Word, love to His ways. These are the fruits of the vineyard: living faith that honours and glorifies the Lord; humility – that is a beautiful fruit of the Spirit; thanksgiving; holy gratitude; a good hope through grace. So you follow me.

Now the heart of a believer in greater or less measure, where everything was barren before, everything was dry, dark, dead, there is now this work of the Spirit of God, these things that are planted, this bringing forth of fruit, in greater or less measure, to eternal life. And lingering here a moment, have you noticed this, that in the epistles, perhaps if there is an emphasis on one thing more than anything else in the lives of the people of God, it is that they should be fruitful; they should not be barren? “Herein is My Father glorified,” said the Lord Jesus, “that ye bear much fruit.”

So, “Keep thy heart with all diligence.” We have a vineyard, and the vineyard is our heart, and we are commanded to keep it. We read in one place of the husbandman coming, looking for the precious fruit, and he found none. The Lord requires fruit in all His people. One of our great concerns surely is this: our barrenness. Don’t we have to mourn over it! “This people have I formed for Myself; they shall shew forth My praise.” We do not feel we do shew forth the Lord’s praise as we should. We are concerned, we mourn about our barrenness, but we would be fruitful. We would be fruitful vines. We would bring forth fruit. And the Lord commands it. But it is a solemn thing if we are occupied so much with so many other things. They may be wrong things, but they may be right things;

but if they come first, if they come before the Lord, then there is the condemnation.

What was it with dear Martha of Bethany? What could she have been doing better? She was so concerned for the Lord Jesus, His comfort, His welfare. She was busy. But that one thing that was vital: to sit at His feet, to be near Him, to hear His voice. “One thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part.” Mary was the fruitful vineyard in Bethany that day. Mary was bringing forth fruit to eternal life. Mind you, in other places you find very much that Martha was. “Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.” But the Lord’s will, that His people should bring forth fruit to eternal life.

We could have read John chapter 15, this morning, that emphasis, the same blessed truth but from a different standpoint, Christ as the living Vine and His people the branches. But O that emphasis! “Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away.” It is that emphasis on bringing forth fruit to eternal life.

So we are told to keep our vineyard, the vineyard of our heart. Later on in this Book we have this: “Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish.” That is self-examination. It is one of the hardest things, because we have something inside us which always takes our own part, which always makes excuses. But this self-examination. Of course, it refers to the church of God on earth. We would get up early and go to the vineyard and see if the vine flourish and pray for it – new converts, the tender fruits of the Spirit upon the branches – but personally, our own hearts. “Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves.” It seems a strange ending. It seems as if the Lord Jesus Himself commends this one examining the vineyard of his own heart. “There will I give thee my loves.”

“They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.” Well then, how do we keep our vineyard? How do we keep our heart? One thing must be *watchfulness*. There is a prayer just after this: “Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.” Now you see this one here. She was not praying that

prayer. She was not being watchful in her own vineyard. She was in these other vineyards, but in her own heart she was not being watchful. There are these foxes, these little foxes, and we need to be careful of them, in the church of God, in our homes, in our families, and especially in our hearts. Now there are a lot of little foxes. Of course, Satan is the great fox. We have to watch for him.

And we have to watch in prayer, and our prayer must ever be, “Save me, O God.” I think those first four words of the sixty-ninth Psalm are vital to every believer, young or old, whatever stage of experience. “Save me, O God.” Now that is keeping the vineyard; that is being watchful. Save me from Satan, that great fox. Save me from these little foxes that spoil the vine. Save me by Thy grace. Save me from my sins. Save me from hell. Save me by Thy precious blood. Save me day by day from falling. Save me from unbelief. Save me in the trying hour. Save me from sinking. Save me at last. Save me eternally. That is keeping your vineyard. It is personal – “me, O God.” Some of those old Negro spirituals have some good divinity in. One says, “It is me, O Lord, not the preacher, not the deacon; it is me, O Lord. Not my father, not my mother; it is me, O Lord.” We do need the Lord to give us that watchful spirit.

I read you those verses in the twenty-seventh chapter of Proverbs because we have the exhortation to be watchful, to keep an eye on the flocks, to keep an eye on the herds, to keep an eye on the vines. O may the Lord give us this watchful spirit to keep the vine of our hearts.

What had she done? She had let the hedge break down. That is how the little foxes get in, when the hedge is broken down. Let us be clear, there is a hedge of everlasting love around all God’s people and that can never be broken down. But there is a hedge of separation from evil influences and wrong things, error, and sadly that can be broken down, and that is where we need to be watchful, that that hedge is not broken down. The little foxes cannot get in if the hedge is not broken down. O to be watchful, to keep our own vineyard! “Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines” – which means there is not going to be any fruit, or there is not going to be much. “For our vines have tender grapes.” They can easily be destroyed.

Well, I suppose many sermons might be preached on what are the little foxes. They are these little things that creep in. A little fox can get in where a big fox cannot. Have you ever seen a little fox? There is not a more beautiful creature in existence than a little fox. But little foxes grow up into big foxes, and they have sharp teeth, and they work havoc. I have talked to two people who found a little baby fox and brought it up, and it was a most beautiful creature. But I had an uncle who lived in a mansion in Wales. He was in charge of all the horses. They found a little fox and they kept it and everybody loved it, and one day it caught the smell of blood, and didn't it do some damage, and didn't it cause hurt to a lot of people!

Now this keeping of the vineyard, there needs to be this watchfulness for these little foxes that come into your heart and creep into your heart. O this keeping of the vineyard! "Mine own vineyard have I not kept." It is often our sad complaint. And the vineyard needs to be watered as well as watched, and watered in prayer. Now how often the Lord Jesus put the two together: "Watch and pray. Didn't He say it to His three disciples even in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Watch and pray." O to be made watchful in prayer, to be kept watchful in prayer! And along with it, the Word of God. You know what happens: if we are too busy, and we are too busy in right things, well prayer is neglected and the Word of God is neglected. It is a busy day in which we live. It is a busy life we have. Never have people been so busy. Never has the world been so busy, and even concerning right things and good things and family things and the things of God. Satan does not mind what it is so long as he brings it to come in before the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. O beware of this: "Mine own vineyard have I not kept."

I understand there was quite a remarkable sermon preached at Bethel just before I came here as pastor. It was that unusual account in the Book of Kings. But without going into all the details of it, whether this man was told to watch a man and make sure he did not escape, but he did, and when he was taken to task, he said, "As thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone." I believe the minister did not take it in the context, the story there, but he took it how often it is like that with you and me spiritually concerning the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. "As thy servant was busy here and there, He was gone."

“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” May the Lord be with us in this. May we not be so taken up with other things, but O may the Lord bless us with that watchful spirit. May He give us more of that praying spirit, and that praying spirit over His holy Word, because the vineyard of our hearts needs to be watered by the Word of His grace, under the preaching of the everlasting gospel, praying that it might be profitable, and in our private reading and in meditation, that it might be a help. O but praying for the Lord’s blessing, praying to know more of His love, praying for His visits, praying that He will look down upon us, that He will be with us, praying to be helped, praying to be kept, praying to do His will. And that beautiful prayer of the eightieth Psalm: “Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” Because really that is the only way we can keep the vineyard, when the Lord in love and mercy enables us to be watchful, when He blesses His own Word to the watering of our souls, as He did the preaching of Apollos at Corinth, and when He enables us to pray, and when He answers our prayers, and when He Himself comes down and visits the vineyard. “Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine.” O make it a fruitful vine. May it bring forth fruit to the honour and glory of Thy name.

And sometimes there is the pruning. They say that is vital. Those who understand vines say it is exceedingly skilful. We have to leave that to the Lord, but if we are keeping our vine, the vine of our hearts, if it is going to be really fruitful, sometimes there will be the pruning, or as John 15 uses the expression, the purging. “Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it” – prunes it – “that it may bring forth more fruit.” Sometimes it is by a word. Do you ever come to chapel and the word finds you out and condemns you and corrects you and shows you something wrong in your life, and when you get home you have to put it right? Or sometimes it is something you cannot put right and you have to beg the Lord to put it right.

“They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.” And sometimes these sorrows and perplexities and disappointments come. We say, “Lord, why is this?” Sometimes we say, “Lord, stay Thy hand; spare Thy hand.” But it is part of making the vineyard fruitful, to bring forth fruit to eternal life. Perhaps as you look back

over your lives, you look at some sacred seasons, and perhaps they have been those seasons of sorrow. Perhaps your heart has been almost broken and then you have said, "Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none." Then as Newton says, "Let broken-hearted sinners behold a broken-hearted Saviour."

"His dear heart was broken too,
When He bore the curse for you."

O may the Lord make us fruitful. May we not neglect our own vineyard, the vineyard of our own heart. May we be delivered from this condemnation: "They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept."

I have spoken of a lot of different things this morning, a lot of solemn things, a lot of important things. I have spoken as the Lord opened it, as the Lord has led me, and may the Lord sanctify it to us as a church and as a congregation, that personally, in His fear, we might bring forth fruit to His name, to His honour and glory, and that we might be delivered from this condemnation: "They made me the keeper of the vineyards; *but* mine own vineyard have I not kept."

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Lord, if with Thee part I bear;
If I through Thy Word am clean;
In Thy mercy if I share;
If Thy blood has purged my sin;
To my needy soul impart
Thy good Spirit from above,
To enrich my barren heart
With humility and love.

Lord, my heart, a desert vast,
Thy reviving hand requires;
Sin has laid my vineyard waste,
Overgrown with weeds and briars.

Thou canst make this desert bloom;
Breathe, O breathe, celestial Dove,
Till it blow with rich perfume
Of humility and love.

Vanquish in me lust and pride;
All my stubbornness subdue;
Smile me into fruit, or chide,
If no milder means will do.
Ah! compassionate my case;
Let the poor Thy pity move;
Give me of Thy boundless grace,
Give humility and love.

Why should one that bears Thy name,
Why should Thy adopted child,
Be in rags, exposed to shame,
Like a savage, fierce and wild?
With Thy children I would sit,
And not like an alien rove;
Clothe my soul and make it fit,
With humility and love.

Greatest sinners, greatly spared,
Love much, and themselves abase;
Mine's a paradox too hard –
Rich of mercy, poor of grace;
Me Thou hast forgiven much;
(This my sins too plainly prove).
Give me what Thou givest such –
Much humility and love.

J. Hart