

“STEWARDSHIP OF GOD’S GIFT OF MARRIAGE: CATCHING THE LITTLE FOXES OF MARRIAGE.”

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Scripture Texts: Song of Solomon 2:13-15

Introduction.

My theme for these first three months of sermons is the stewardship of God’s good gifts to us. He has given us many gifts of His grace to enjoy but the world, our flesh and the devil are waging war on God’s good gifts to get us to misuse or abuse or neglect them and I want us to be equipped to fight back.

We have considered God’s gift of retirement and how to use the end of life to finish well, in a manner pleasing to Him. We considered God’s gift of children and how much He loves His children and calls for a cheerful response of love and obedience and how we train our children to do that.

This week we will consider God’s gift of marriage and ways to protect our marriages from the enemy’s assaults.

Let me quickly add everything I say this morning about marriage actually applies to all of our relationships, especially those relationships that are most important to us, whether family or friends. And most of what I have to say even applies to protecting the most important relationship of all, our relationship with Jesus Christ. So for those who are not married, please translate what I say into those relationships that are important to you and vulnerable to the enemy or the world’s attack.

Marriage is the foundational institution on which society, culture, and civilization is built. Marriage is called by Paul a profound mystery because it opens a window into this open universe we live in, a window through which we see one of God’s most beautiful purposes and plans.

Do you want to know how important marriage is? Consider that the world began with a marriage in a garden and the world will end with a marriage feast in heaven. Something huge is going on here.

Marriage is one of the most beautiful things in God’s creation because it is a reflection of the relationship that exists between Christ and His bride the Church. And this is why the principalities and powers in the world are hell bent to destroy this beautiful picture. This is why we need to fight to protect and honor God’s design for marriage.

Another metaphor the Bible uses for marriage is a garden or a vineyard which we see in our text in Song of Solomon, a book about the love and romance of marriage. The fig trees are fruitful, the vines are in blossom, the garden is growing and thriving. And in the midst of this beauty and goodness there are threats and dangers to the relationship. If the lovers ignore the threats and don't take preventative measures to remove them their beautiful vineyard will be spoiled.

The danger is described as little foxes, which given the nature of foxes, is a very fitting description of the dangers we face in all our relationships at home, at school, at work, in our church. Think for a moment about the nature of foxes. What do you know about them?

What is the nature of foxes?

The first thing to notice about foxes might be the most dangerous. *They are cute and innocent looking.* What's not to like about the little fox on the bulletin cover? They are kind of pretty and cuddly looking. And there is the danger. These cute little foxes can destroy a vineyard the moment your back is turned.

Foxes are little. Their size makes us think they are nothing much to worry about. We tend to underestimate the small things but small does not mean insignificant. One little fox can lead to a lot more foxes and a big problem.

Foxes are by nature nocturnal. They do their work under the cover of darkness, out of sight. They are at work when others are sleeping and not paying attention. Satan is called the Prince of Darkness for a reason.

Foxes are cunning and smart. Foxes are known for being sly, crafty, deceptive and can sneak up on you. They are mischievous, they will trick you.

Foxes are fast. They dart into the vineyard and eat the fruit, then run away. They are hard to catch.

Foxes are malicious, destructive. They burrow under the defenses, gnawing the branches, biting the bark, making bare the roots, devouring the ripe grapes, spoiling the vineyard.

Enough of us here have experiences with puppies and kittens, dogs and cats, and various other critters to know the damage and destruction they can do in a short time. All of these traits and attributes are an apt description of who? Satan. He can be a roaring lion and he can be a quick, little, sly, crafty, destructive fox. I hesitate to call him

cute, but Scripture does say he comes disguised as an angel of light which is innocent looking.

What are the little foxes in our relationships?

What are the little foxes in our lives and relationships and marriages?

One other thing we know about foxes is there are lots of different kinds of them, 23 different kinds like red, gray, silver, white. And there are at least that many kinds of foxes that can spoil the vineyard of our relationships and damage the love, beauty, peace and fruitfulness of our marriages.

I am going to name a bunch of them, without going into much detail. Listen and think about which ones are in your vineyard. Decide right now to be honest and to be willing to name them and catch them and deal with them. We have to name them before we can start killing them. If we are really honest we will acknowledge all of them. After 43 years of marriage, I confess all of them can still creep back into our vineyard at any moment.

Let's start with the fox of *self*, selfishness, self-centeredness, self-love, self-indulgence. This fox wants his own way and gets impatient or angry when he doesn't get it. He thinks more about himself than others. He is selfish with his time and money. (I Corinthians 10:24)

By the way, when I say "he" I am using it inclusively of he and she, like all mankind.

Related is the fox of *pride*. All foxes have pride blood in them. He thinks he is bigger, better, smarter, prettier, more spiritual, more important, more whatever. He is full of himself and lacks humility. This fox gets defensive quickly trying to protect his own opinion, his own needs, desire. This fox is puffed up and wants everyone to think the best of him. (Proverbs 16:21)

The fox of *anger* is a most common species. His temper flares quickly, he is combative, better at escalation than de-escalation. He may stew for a bit but then blows his top. He is not slow to anger and keeps everyone on edge or walking on eggshells.

Related is the fox of the *tongue*. This is the fox of the sharp tongue, unkind, impulsive, critical words, those little words that sting. This is the fox of foul, obscene or unwholesome words. This is the fox of poor communication or miscommunication or no communication (Ephesians 4:29; 5:4; James 3)

Then there is the fox of *thoughtlessness*, inattention, insensitivity, uncaring, lack of respect, rudeness. Being easily annoyed or irritated at little things.

The fox of *differences* rears its head when we aren't on the same page or are unwilling to work through our differences, different priorities, different views or attitudes about money, time, sex, chores, roles and responsibilities. Differences over how to deal with anxiety, worry, stress, problems. Different priorities about family commitments, entertainment, social media, hobbies, outside interests or friends.

The fox of *perfectionism* can be rather demanding, can't be pleased, has a critical spirit, or too high of expectations or unspoken expectations.

The fox of *procrastination* leads to complacency, laziness, lack of diligence or initiative, just coasting along, neglecting important things that need attention. He puts off dealing with foxes.

The fox of *bitterness* flows from all these other foxes. A growing discontentment over unmet needs and lack of respect leading to a growing deep resentment. Bitterness over all the other foxes.

The fox of *unforgiveness* keeps offenses or grudges or a cold shoulder. It won't offer an apology or accept one if offered. He doesn't seek to make things right, to be reconciled.

The fox of *spiritual neglect* leads to all kinds of damage to soul and family, neglecting the most important things in life, prayer, Scripture, worship, seeking to have a Christ-centered life and home. He is losing his first love.

This little fox brings with him little compromises, little disobedience, little indulgences of the flesh, that slowly erode our faith. This spoils the entire vineyard, because it destroys the very purpose for which the vineyard was created.

So many foxes, so many sins, sins of the flesh and heart, attitudes, habits. Seemingly small foxes but if left unattended to or overlooked or excused lead to so much damage and destruction.

The truth be told, are there really any little foxes? Are there really any little sins? When it comes to things that can ruin your relationship or ruin your marriage, nothing is little. It shouldn't be ignored because it seems small. It should be dealt with the very moment it enters the garden.

What do you do with little foxes?

Two choices. Ignore them or do something about them.

How many of you have a check engine light blinking on your dashboard you are ignoring? Have you ever had a smoke detector decide to start chirping at 3 am and you just want to put in ear plugs and try to go back to sleep?

Instead of fixing a problem, we often just try to ignore it or plug our ears because it's too uncomfortable to deal with. Or we don't heed the warning signs because we don't even know there is a problem.

Why do we ignore them? We might dismiss them as little, insignificant, not that big a deal. We might be conflict avoiders, so we make excuses or withdraw into silence. We want the other person to start, or do the heavy lifting.

Let's face it, relationships take hard work and we don't want to do it. But at what cost? And how long until irreparable damage is done and the once beautiful vineyard is spoiled?

Having problems doesn't mean you have a bad marriage. Two sinners are going to sin. Be honest about your sin and your contributions to your issues. Don't try to just keep the peace at all cost, and avoid conflict or unpleasant discussions at all cost. The cost is too high.

Our text is a call to action, a call to proactively do something about the foxes before they do any harm. It's a call to fight against complacency and coasting and catch the little foxes.

The wording here implies she is asking him to protect them and their relationship. She wants him to take the lead, both in recognizing the danger and protecting the relationship. He should be on the hunt for any potential enemies.

Husbands are more apt to see physical danger, external dangers, if there is an intruder in the home he will deal with it. But he must also be paying attention to the internal intruders, the relational, emotional, spiritual dangers in the home.

Notice the little words "us" and "our." This is also a call to work together, to team up. To not fight each other but work together against a common enemy. Always remember the enemy is not the other person, it is Satan, he is your common enemy, so don't fight each other, fight him together.

- Tend your vineyard, tend your vines, tend your relationship, so little things don't become big things. It is always easier to deal with problems when they are small.
- Be vigilant, be watching for the foxes, expect to see them, name them, call them out and then deal with them. Don't let your guard down. And don't get comfortable with them and keep any of them around as pets.

- Don't think for a minute you won't have a lifetime of issues to work through, marriage is work and it is sanctifying. There will be differences, of perspectives, opinions, desires, needs.
- Create daily habits that keep the record of wrongs short and cleaned up. Be reconciled every day. Forgive your debts every day. Ask how are you, how are we doing? Give a kiss, a hug and an "I love you" every day. And better yet, pray together everyday.
- The best way to identify and trap and kill foxes is with the two-edged sword of the Word of God and power of prayer.

Remember this is a spiritual war, a spiritual battle, it must be fought with spiritual weapons, with prayer, with faith in Jesus, confidence in the Word of God, reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit. Rely on His power to give you grace, courage and strength.

And when you fall or fail, pray and confess your sin and your humble dependence on Him and ask Him to give you a stronger desire for a pure heart and the fruit of self-control.

One more important thing whenever you are dealing with sin in any relationship. Always make sure you see the log in your own eye first, and that you always see your sin as the worst. Have the same mind as the Apostle Paul, I am the chief sinner, the worst sinner. That will keep you from judging or acting too harshly toward another's sin.

Implications and application.

Tender grapes are the best grapes, and they are the most vulnerable and need the most protection. If we will kill the little foxes we will make our marriage and our relationships a more fruitful garden, a more verdant vineyard to the glory of God.

I urge every married couple here or watching to have more than one honest conversation this week where each one of you names some of your foxes and begins active steps to kill them. Jesus came into the world to kill the biggest fox spoiling the vineyard of His bride, and He is here to help you do the same.

If you fight the good fight against all the little foxes trying to destroy the garden of your home and marriage you will resist evil and the evil one. You will be honoring God's good gift to you. You will be confessing the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit and the glory of the Father.

Colossians 3:12-15 Put on then, ... compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.