The Keeper Not Kept

Song of Solomon 1:6

The lesson that I am to bring to you this evening from the Song of Solomon is not the central lesson of the book. The book is a poem of praise and love. It is in praise of human love, first of all, the love between a man and a woman. In a mystical sense it is in praise of the love between Christ and His church.

But there is a word in the sixth verse of the first chapter that seems to me so fundamental and so important to us as Christian workers that I cannot refrain from bringing this message to you. It is a text that every preacher ought to frame and hang upon the walls of his study. It ought to ring in his heart morning, noon and night. It is a text that every Christian worker ought to keep house with from the time he enters the Church, to the close of life's day. It ought to be the first thought that greets us with our awakening and the last that lingers with us as we close our eyes in the rest of sleep.

This is the text: "They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept." You can see at once that the text is a confession and an apology. It is a confession of failure. The one who makes it is conscious of the fact that she is not so beautiful as she might have been. She is not so charming nor so winsome as it was in her power to be. She is conscious of the fact that she has not reached her highest and her best. "Mine own vineyard have I not kept."

The reason that she gives for this failure is that she has been so busy in the interests of others. She has worked so hard and faithfully in the cultivation of the gardens of others that her own garden has grown up in weeds. She has been so diligent in her care of the flowers of others that all her roses are withered. She had been so eager to give the bread of life to others that she has allowed herself to become starved and famished for lack of the very bread that she had been so zealously recommending to others.

"They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept." This tells the story of a species of failure that threatens every Christian worker. It is a kind of failure that is all the more dangerous because there is so much in it that seems plausible and praise-worthy. This woman was not an idler. She was a worker, a very hard and earnest and diligent worker. Yet in spite of her work she made a tragic failure.

Now, I am well aware that all of us do not fail as she did. More people fail from sheer idleness, I dare say, than from any other one cause. It is a great help toward a holy life to have something to do. The Church member who does nothing, who puts no toil into his profession, is certainly doomed. The house that remains empty will certainly have a tenant of some kind very soon.

But the lesson that this text emphasizes is that mere work is not enough. We are tempted sometimes to think that the greatest servants of the Church are those who preach the most sermons and superintend the most schools and teach the most classes and serve on the most committees. There are those of us who take a kind of pride in rushing from one thing to another. There are Churches who like to see their pastors much engaged. The modern pastor is in danger of the St. Vitus's dance as he hurries from one service to another. Truly, we are cumbered with much serving.
Now, all this may be helpful and necessary. It also may be in large measure very powerless and very useless. I have known very active folks who were also very useless. I recall a woman that used to belong to my Church who was busy morning, noon and night. She worked and worked hard. But the Church would have been far better off if she had moved to San Francisco. She did her work in such a spirit that she did positively more harm than good. She was all right in activity, but she was very defective in Christian character.

Such was the failure made by this keeper of the vineyards. Such a failure is a persistent temptation of the Christian worker today, a temptation, I say, that is all the more insidious because those who so fail, fail in doing what is altogether commendable. They fail not as idlers, but as workers. Then it is an especially dangerous temptation, in the second place, because it has such a fine appearance of unselfishness. It seems magnificent to be so concerned with the vineyard of your brother that you absolutely neglect your own.

Now, we are to be concerned with the needs of our brother. Let us never forget that. The second question that God ever asked is this question: "Where is thy brother?" And we dare not say that the answer to that question is none of our business. We are debtors, every one of us. And the one who replied to this question by a virtual declaration that it was no affair of his where his brother was, that man's name has come down to us black with infamy and red with blood. And yet the man who today would give Cain's answer would be far more criminal even than Cain himself.

If then it was altogether right for this individual to work and to work hard, if it was altogether right for this keeper of vineyards to be deeply interested in the vineyards of others, wherein was the failure? Answer: The failure was in thinking that there could be any large doing without a corresponding being. If you want to do big things there is only one way and that is by being big. To have truly high conduct you must begin by having high character. It is absolutely wise and necessary to face God's second question: "Where is thy brother?" But we can only give an adequate answer to that question by first of all facing God's first question.

What is God's first question? I suppose you remember it. He asked it of Adam and it is the first question that He ever put to man in this world. "And the Lord God called unto Adam and said, Where art thou?" He asked man about himself before He asked him about any one else.

And, my brethren, it is necessary that we keep the divine order today. Before I am ready to cast the mote out of my brother's eye I must first cast the beam out of my own eye. Before I say to my brother, "Behold, the lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world," I must have found that atoning lamb for myself. Before I induce my brother to take a drink of the water of life I must have kissed that heavenly spring with my one thirst-parched lips. As a preacher I cannot lead you into an experience of grace to which I myself am a stranger. As a teacher you cannot hope to do for your pupils what you have not allowed God first of all to do for yourself. It is the duty of every Christian worker to seek by the grace of God to experience for themselves that which they are trying to teach to those who are committed to their care.

For this reason, to be busy is not enough. Activity is necessary. If
The keeper not kept

we are Christians we will be active. But activity must have something vital and mighty behind it or it will get nowhere. "I will go out as at other times before and shake myself." So said Samson. He had won many a fight in other days. He had won them by the same earnest endeavor that he was expecting to put into this fight. But he failed this time. What was the matter? "He wist not that the Lord was departed from him." In other battles there had been the power of God working through Samson. To this battle he went alone. And going alone he went to meet inevitable defeat.

The fatal defect of getting so busy with the vineyards of others that you neglect your own then is just this: your work in the vineyards of others becomes in large measure useless. I will make poor headway in keeping your vineyard if you see that my own is grown up in nettles and weeds. You should not take me as an authority on the flowers of the spirit, love, joy and peace, if you find no such flowers growing in my own garden. The truth of the matter is that the measure of my ability to assist you in the keeping of your vineyard is just the measure of the thoroughness with which, through the grace of God, I have kept my own. It may seem commendable to get so busy in the interests of others that you forget yourself. It may seem commendable that you get so hurried in going from one service to another that you have no time for the devotional reading of the Bible and for private prayer. But in so doing, you are both robbing yourself and robbing those that you seek to serve.

Paul recognized the truth of that. He knew that a man might be at once active and useless. That is the reason that he made this high resolve: "I so run", he says, "not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."

A castaway - you know what that is. Here is an old pair of shoes. They are worn out. I can't use them any more. I throw them away, not because I am angry at them. I throw them away simply because they are useless. Here is a piece of machinery. I passed through a farm some time ago and there was a mowing machine sitting out in the field, rusting and rotting away. Why was it there? It had served its day. It was of no value. It was useless. It was a castaway. Now, Paul was afraid that he might get to the place where God couldn't use him any more, not because God would forsake him or cease to love him. But he might so act toward God as to make it impossible for God to employ him in His service. He recognized the fact that he might become as savorless salt, "good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot of man."

And because Paul recognized this danger he set himself strenuously to avoid it. He said, "So run I, not as uncertainly." While he was trying to get others to run he did not fail to run himself. While he pointed others to the goal he did not fail to keep his own eyes fixed upon it. While he urged others to run unhampered, with every hindrance laid aside, he himself kept under his body and brought it into subjection and refused to tolerate anything in his own life that would hinder him in his race toward the mark for the prize.

So this is the lesson that I am eager to impress upon your own heart and mine. We are to be keepers of the vineyards. We are to seek and save that which is lost. But first of all we are to see that we ourselves are right with our Lord. Activity is good. It is a necessity. But rightness
The keeper not kept

with God is the supreme necessity. The order of God's promise to Abraham is the order of His promise to us. He did not say to Abraham, "Thou shalt be a blessing and I will bless thee." But He said, "Get thee out and I will bless thee and thou shalt be a blessing." The measure of our power to bless others is the measure of the fullness with which we have allowed God to bless ourselves. What we work out is in proportion to what we have allowed God to work into us. Character is more important than conduct, since it conditions conduct.

The promise of God that looked toward Pentecost was not "Ye shall be witnesses unto me and then receive the Holy Ghost", but "Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost has come upon you, and ye shall be my witnesses." It was not, "Out of your being shall flow living water" and then "Come unto me", but first, "If any man thirst let him come to me and drink. He that believeth on me, out of his inner life shall flow rivers of living water." Let the heavenly Gardner into your own heart. Let Him cultivate the flowers in your soul that you long to see in the souls of others. Then you will not do less, but what you do will have a wonderful power about it, even the power of almighty God.

If you wanted illustrations of this fact you could find them by the score in your own experience. There is one familiar to us all. Was there ever a man more active in the service of the Lord than John Wesley in the early days of his ministry? He preached and prayed and worked. He came as a missionary to our own country, and then home again to toil with no less energy in England. But very little was accomplished.

Then one night he went to a service in Applegate Street in London. In that service there came to him a new and marvelous experience. He felt his heart strangely warmed. And with that hot heart pounding in his bosom he mounted his horse the next day and rode clean through the centuries. And in so doing he remade the world. The man with the hot heart was no less active than he had been in other days. But yesterday his activity was the struggle of a shorn Samson. Today he acted with power. And not since the days of the apostles has there been so mighty a keeper of the vineyards. And the secret of that might was in the fact that he so gloriously kept his own. May the Lord save every Christian worker here from having to make this dismal confession, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards, and mine own vineyard have I not kept."

1. The coach who flashed
2. Mother, too many clubs
The text, you see, is at once a confession and an apology. The young lover makes this confession acknowledging that however fair she is, she is not so fair as she might have been. However charming she is, there might have been an added charm. Her personality has not attained to the full possibilities of its winenesses. She has been so busy that she has neglected herself. "They made me the keeper of the vineyard; but mine own vineyard have I not kept."

Now it is not our purpose to interpret this passage in the light of the context. Rather take it as a parable of the danger that continually threatens and often entrap the Christian workers. How many earnest and active people might take these very words as an expression of the moral failure of their own lives? "They made me the keeper of the vineyard; but mine own vineyard have I not kept." Such a confession might be made by many an earnest pastor. Such a confession might be made by many an active Sunday-School teacher. Such might be made by many a diligent officer in the Church.

"It is an insidious danger. It is so easy to talk about Jesus and yet not know Him. It is so easy to commend the bread of life to others and yet not avail ourselves of the privilege of feeding upon it personally. It is so easy to point others to the Water of Life and yet not take time to slake our thirst from its brimming water. Every earnest worker, I think, knows something of the subtle temptation to be very busy about holy things and yet lose out of his own heart the conscious presence of the Holy Lord."

"Mine own vineyard have I not kept." It is a tragic confession. I wonder of how many of us it is true. How many of us in spite of all our activities are conscious of personal moral failure? If we were to speak out this morning, what would we say about ourselves? Would we speak after the fashion of this text? Would we be compelled in honesty to confess our disappointment in our own spiritual attainments?

There are many today who are genuinely disappointed in their Christian lives. They are conscious of the fact that they have not attained. They realize that their own characters are wanting in the personal fragrance and charm that belong to those who dwell much in the presence of God, the King. They are conscious of a lack of power. They work, but little is accomplished. They toil, but see small results. They try to fight a good fight, but sin seems little afraid in their presence. And if such were to speak their real convictions today, they would give utterance to this tearful sentence, "My own vineyard have I not kept."
What is the cause of this type of failure?

It is not positive and aggressive sin. Of course, sin always means weakness. Sin always means defeat. It is purity alone that is strong. Whenever the Christian worker turns aside to the forbidden, he remains his efforts and cuts the heart of his strength. This is true whether his sin is ever known to anyone but himself or not. It is only as we are clean that we are mighty.

Neither was this failure born of idleness. Idleness is a fruitful source of failure. I think it is safe to say that it is the most fruitful. That is, more people lose the grip of things eternal through idleness, through the shirking of their responsibilities, than for any other cause. I think it is safe to say that more people will bear the sentence "Inasmuch as ye did it not" at the final judgment than any other one sentence.

The truth of the matter is, that while one may be active and yet not a Christian, no man can be a Christian and be an idler. If you are shirking your responsibility, if you are allowing the call of the world's need to ring in your ears and are making no response, if you are doing nothing to heal the world's open sore, then that in itself shows that you are a stranger to God. You are a debtor, whether you are in the Church or out of the Church. To refuse to pay your debt is to insure your own moral ruin.

We tend to forget this important truth. We think men are lost because they lie and steal and so they are, but more are lost through sheer uselessness. What multitudes of such there are both within and without the Church. Descent folks and respectable, but useless. They are well wishers but not well doers. If they were to slip out of the world tomorrow, they would not be missed in the great fight for righteousness. They have taken the surest of all sure roads to hell, and that is the road of doing nothing at all.

But the one who makes this confession is a worker. This is the type of failure that is born of being too busy. "Mine own vineyard have I not kept". Why? I have been so busy toiling in the vineyards of others, I have been so concerned about my friends that I forgot myself. I have been so interested in cultivating the flowers of the spirit, love and joy and peace in the gardens of others that I have allowed my own to grow up in weeds. I have been so earnest and enthusiastic in bringing others to the saving touch of Jesus Christ that I have lost touch with Him myself. I have been so diligent in pointing others to the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world, that I have lost the vision of His face.

As a coach

While I was at Harvard, I knew a bright young fellow, who was much in demand by those who were behind in their studies as a coach. In fact he gave so much time to coaching others, that he failed on his own examination. I know a mother who was so busy saving the children of other
mothers, that she left her own to the nurture of the street. And I have known Christian workers get so busy doing a thousand things that they utterly neglected the culture of their own souls and the keeping up of their vital touch with Christ.

This temptation presses upon us today harder than ever before. This is true for two reasons.

1. The machinery of the Church has greatly multiplied, in these recent years. We are in constant danger of becoming a slave of our many organizations. The Apostles recognized that danger in the early Church and guarded against it. "Look you out among you," they said, "for certain men of honest report forsook of the Holy Christ and wisdom, whom we may point over this business, but we will give ourselves constantly to prayer and the ministry of the Word". But we of today have not always been thus wise.

Then this danger is insidious in the second place, because this type of failure seems so plausible. To be so busy working for others that you utterly forget yourself and your own needs appeals very strongly to the modern mind. It has a show of great unselfishness. To be keenly concerned about your own personal salvation is not looked upon with favor in many quarters today. Such an attitude is characterized as glorified selfishness. Therefore the applause of the world makes it easy for us to congratulate ourselves upon the fact that we are so busy working for Christ that we have forgotten Christ himself.

III

But what is wrong with this program?

1. In following it, we fail to attain the goal that we set out to attain. To keep the vineyards of others is a very noble and worthy ambition. But we must realize that other things being equal, the measure of our capacity to keep the other man's vineyard is the measure of the thoroughness with which we have kept our own. I am recognizing the fact that God some times uses an unholy man for a holy task. But that does not do away with this fundamental truth, that there can be no really great doing without a corresponding being. That is, the way to do more is to be more. The way to do better is to be better.

How much of our failure to keep the vineyards has its source here, that we have not rightly kept our own. For this reason, many of us are very active but very ineffective at the same time. I have in mind a young woman who belonged to my church. She was one of the most active and energetic women that I have ever known. She stood ready for every good work, but she would spoil everything she did by her unchristian attitude during the performing of the task or after. She was abundant in labors, but defective in Christlike character. I told her one day that she reminded me of somebody who would put months cultivating a beautiful flower and just as that flower was about to blossom, in a fit of anger, she would pull it up by the roots and tear it to pieces.

It is altogether possible to work in such a spirit as to accomplish nothing and sometimes worse than nothing. It is altogether possible to give after such a fashion that your gifts bring no real blessing. That was
the case with the gift of the Knight in the "Vision of Sir Launfal", when the beggar asked him for alms, he did not refuse him. He threw him a piece of gold. But the beggar did not even pick it up.

"The beggar left the coin in the dust, Better to me the poor man's crust, Though he turn me empty from his door".

The man, therefore, who is so busy trying to cast the mote out of his brother's eye, that he neglects the beam that is within his own, fails utterly to help his brother. The man who is so engaged with his brother's vineyard that his own becomes a thing of weeds and nettles will render a very meager service to his brother. In other words, to put the emphasis on work alone, is to fail in the doing of the very task for which you sacrifice your own soul to attain.

2. This program is a failure in the second place because it ends in a ruin. No man can be saved, who when saved, is unwilling to work. But, having said that, it is also true that no man is saved by works. The elder son was a worker but he was not for that reason approved of God. He stands in the story utterly condemned. He is far more hopeless in his Father's house than is the prodigal away in the far country.

When Jesus pictured to us the judgement scene, he said there would be present those who would have this to say for themselves, "Lord did we not prophesy Thy name and in Thy name cast out beams and do many wondrous works". And the answer made to that question was a denial. The works were all admitted. The answer was this: "I never knew you", "All ye did was in the energy of the flesh and not in the power of the spirit". Your own vineyard you did not keep.

When John Knox lay on his death bed, they heard him groan as if passing through a terrible paroxysm of pain. They thought he must be dying. But bye and bye his groan ceased, then he said, "Many a fierce battle has Satan given me in my time, but none more fierce than this. He has come to tell me that I am to go to Heaven because of my deserving and because of my works. But I have driven him away by the sword of the spirit. I have told him by the grace of God I am what I am."

No saint ever came to the end of the journey whose glory was in his good works.

"By grace are ye saved, Through faith and that not of yourself, It is the gift of God, Not of works any man should boast."

And when we reach the end of the journey, we can do nothing better than the old Scottish saint who declared, "I have taken all my good deeds and all my bad deeds and have thrown them down at the feet of Jesus and have taken me to the cross where I find perfect peace and rest".
IV

What is the remedy then for this man who has been too busy to look after the culture of his own spiritual life.

The remedy is not idleness. He will not be cured by losing all interest in the vineyard of others. The second question God ever asked is this question, "Where is thy brother?" And the man who replied by saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" did not cover himself with glory. His name has come down through the centuries, blackened by selfishness, and crimson with murder. There is no escape from our obligation to our brother. To quit your efforts to serve is never a cure for any evil.

What, I repeat, is the remedy? To keep the Scriptural order. We may freely give, but only after we have freely received. Simon is to strengthen his brother, but not till he himself has been converted. Abraham is to be a blessing, but he is himself to be blessed first. We are called to be witnesses but only after we have received power through the Holy Spirit. That is, we are not to quit work, but we are to cease to put work first. We are to put righteousness with God first.

That is what Jesus meant by those rather perplexing words to the Seventy. They had just returned from an evangelistic tour. They had met with great success. They came back flushed with joy and with victory. They say to their Lord, with exultation, in their hearts and their faces. "Master, even the spirits are subject unto us through Thy name. By Thy power we have been able to cast out evil spirits".

And what answer did Jesus make? He did not give the answer that they expected. He said, "Rejoice not that the spirits are subject unto you. But rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven". Now by this he does not mean that we are not to be glad of the success that attends our labors. But what he does mean is this. Do not misplace your emphasis. Do not get so concerned with the effect that you forget the cause. Do not get so taken up with the stream that you forget its source. To cast out demons is a great work, but to have your name written in heaven is greater still.

Why is this true? It is because character is greater than gifts. It is because right standing with God is greater than deeds. This true first because without this right standing, we tend to fail in our services and we certainly fail in personal salvation. But if we put character first, then we make sure of our own salvation and instead of lessening our service of making it less affective, we increase its affectiveness beyond all human capacity to compute. If you want proof of the truth of this, you can find it possibly in your own experience. Certainly, upon almost every page of human history.

Take this one for instance. Here is a young man at Oxford University. He is the leader of the Holy Club. His name is John Wesley. He was active and earnest while at the university. A little later he goes as a missionary to the Indians. Then he goes back again to his native land. He is always working with untiring energy. But he himself says that while he worked much he saw but little result of his efforts. But one night he goes into a little service in London where he feels his
heart strangely warm. He comes forth from this service with an assurance of salvation of rightness with God. He does not work less. He works more, and not only so, but there is a power in his work today to which he was an utter stranger in the early days of his ministry. And in the diligent keeping of his own vineyard he helped to sow the flowers in the gardens of the wide world.