

Foxy Christians

Prayer

Good morning, today's sermon is about Foxy Christians.

I was looking at some foxes this week online. Red Foxes, Silver foxes, Fennec foxes, Grey foxes, Cape foxes and others, one of the most beautiful I have seen is the Arctic fox. What an amazing animal. Foxes are a quick, clever and cunning species that appears in many forms.

Now in John 15:5 Jesus said: "I am the vine and you are the branches. In you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

In the song of Songs 2:15 we read: "Catch for us the little foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.

When we consider that the vineyard is symbolic of the church and the bringing forth of spiritual fruit, we can plainly see that these scriptures are telling us two very important things:

The first is that we as Christians have a purpose. That purpose is to bring forth fruit. If we are the branches that means that the fruit comes from us. Each of us is to bear fruit. It exemplifies that a branch that is not connected to the vine, is dead and useless. The life in the branch flows from the vine, it provides nutrients, life giving water and support to the branches in their task of bringing forth fruit.

The second is that little foxes can destroy the vineyard. What does this mean? Foxes may eat a portion of the harvest, but that is not where most of the damage is done. After all they primarily eat mice, rabbits or birds. The damage is that they systematically destroy the harvest?

What was Solomon showing us in this verse? I ask you to consider that there are a lot of vineyards in Israel. When spring comes to the vineyard and new shoots start to grow, the little foxes come in and bite off the shoots, They try to damage the connection between the vine and the branches by gnawing away at them, if grapes are produced, they may eat some of the fruit. In Israel this was a constant battle between those who grew the grapes and the foxes.

Let's think about this for a minute. We have a little fox, they are maybe 20" or about 50cm long and depending on species etc. Usually weigh between 8-10lbs or 16-20kg.

Now consider if an 800lb grizzly were smashing his way through your garden, that would instill a bit of fear or at least some serious concern would it not. Now let's say you have some aphids eating in your garden. Which situation would cause you the most concern? Which is the most obvious destruction and which is the more subtle?

If there is a clear and present danger to the church, such as the building closing or a leak in the ceiling, perhaps the furnace is not working; these items become major and everyone pulls together to resolve

the problems. In fact, we have done that in this very church from time to time. This is kind of like when everyone can see the grizzly smashing through the garden. This type of situation instills fear, we call the right authorities, we do whatever needs doing, because the danger is immediately obvious.

Little foxes are a lot smaller, they are much less in your face than say a grizzly bear and so they are easier to ignore. Like the aphid, you might not realize they are there until a massive amount of damage has been done. Especially if one is not invested in keeping an eye on the garden or helping it to grow. One might want the fruit, but there is a lot of effort and commitment in keeping damaging insects and animals from destroying the garden.

But we were talking about Solomons little foxes. They sneak in and may burrow into roots undermining the integrity of the growth, or they may gnaw on the branches causing damage. They enjoy the harvest of fruit for themselves but don't care about the effect what they are doing has on others.

So what is being alluded to here in the Song of Songs?

Little foxes are things that seem small but they go in to undermine what is being done. They exemplify the kind of problems that can destroy relationships. A couple of good examples of this would be: Gossiping about another person in the church. Bad mouthing, backstabbing, even dislike. You are called to love your brothers and sisters not undermine them in any way. You are called to lift them up and help them in their spiritual walk. Let's consider some of these little foxes. What little foxes are hindering marriages today? What tarnishes our testimony in the community? Is there a reputation of control or dominance by some? I am not talking about gross depravity here I am talking about more subtle forms of creating destructive damage.

Still seems a bit nebulous doesn't it. Well, fear not! We are going to cover some concrete "little foxes today"

In no particular order and not a comprehensive list here are a few:

The little fox named "Thoughtless"

Remember back in Genesis 40 the narrative about the butler and the baker? Here we have Joseph and the butler and baker in prison. Now in this prison, Joseph helped these men, He interpreted the dreams that they were having which had seriously disturbed them. He told them what would happen to them. He told the truth, Baker you are going to die, butler you will live.

Now Joseph was helping these men. Of the butler he only asked one thing in return he asked him to simply remember him to Pharaoh: "When you are released, please remind Pharaoh that I am here in jail; I did nothing to deserve this sentence. Please remember me!"

Now let's turn to Genesis 40:23: "Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him."

In our culture today, when we receive some of the fruit from the vine and our need is met, do we remember what someone has done for us? Do we value it or do we have a sense of entitlement? Did the butler deserve the consideration of Joseph? Why did he only remember when it could benefit him?

Lots of questions, but it all comes down to a sense of entitlement and thoughtlessness. Just to be clear, thoughtlessness is marked by a lack of forethought or care. It exemplifies carelessness.

I think it might be good to pull out the old thesaurus. Here are some of the other aspects of thoughtlessness. Watch out for the little foxes that show behaviours such as:

- Being Discourteousness to those around yourself
- Being Disrespectful to those placed under your authority or those placed in authority over you
- Being ill-Mannered
- Being Impertinent
- Being Inconsiderate
- Being Rude

In short, we are supposed to be considerate of the feelings of others, but more than that are our words and actions causing them to be encouraged and produce fruit or are we cutting them down and discouraging brothers and sisters in Christ. I have seen this most often when people are insecure and need to control others and so push down the needs and desires of the others to assert control to make themselves feel better about themselves. In this category, the person being this way toward a brother or sister may not even be aware of their actions.

Jesus himself healed the 10 lepers, but only one returned to be grateful...

The greatest fox plaguing the churches today is:

The Fox called: “Self-Centred”

In our modern society the world has corrupted many important Godly values. It seems that for so many there are challenges around doing only those things which they find please themselves. It is as though our society has become consumeristic. Self-Centred foxes are determined to serve themselves, to please themselves and to exalt themselves.

Wants some good news about self-centredness? Just before Jesus returns it has been foretold in 2 Timothy 3:2 that “Men shall be lovers of their own selves”

Now you might think that self-centredness is a small fox... but this morning, let us consider the tremendous amount of damage that it can do to a person's life?

- It can isolate you from others
- it can destroy relationships with others
- It can destroy your marriages
- It can destroy your family
- It can destroy your church

Am I exaggerating? No, I am not!

What is wrong with a me first attitude?

I mean its roots are in pride and ambition or perhaps egotism, that can hardly be compared with child abuse, or murder, or fornication, or adultery? Right?

The self centred fox is a world unto themselves, their attitude is me first, but unfortunately, it goes beyond that to me first, me last, me always. What I think matters, your opinion doesn't.

Ask yourself this test question... Am I certain that what I do is the right thing; but what others do is questionable?

Do you in fact even feel entitled?

- When I am sick, people ought to make a fuss over me
- When I am in the hospital only a few people came to visit me
- When the service ends, almost nobody bothers to talk to me

Okay revelation time:

There was an article printed in the Gospel Herald; The article was entitled: "How to be Perfectly Miserable, it listed about twenty things. I am going to list 6 of the twenty here:

- Think about yourself
- Talk about yourself
- Expect to be appreciated
- Be Sensitive to Sights
- Never forgive a criticism
- Never forget a service you may have rendered

This six relate directly to self-Centredness...

last thought on this point. Turn with me to Matthew 16:24-26

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

This insidious little fox tries to disrupt the flow of the spirit into our lives, by making us focus on self. Today, we must examine ourselves and if we find ourselves wanting we need to repent of the sin of self-centredness. Are we willing to open a door for another, let them go first in line when we arrive at the same time. Are we willing to pass a plate? Are we willing to go the extra mile for someone without our motivation focused on some perceived benefit back to ourselves?

I hate this fox because it chews away at the roots of relationships. I have seen it destroy marriages, families and yes even breed disharmony in the church. I have heard it best put like this: One thing is

certain: the more death to self-centredness that we experience, the more fully the Lord Jesus is able to live His life in us.

The third fox is named: “Bitter”

You may ask, how does my feeling bitter matter to anyone else by myself. I mean what is so bad about a little bit of bitterness, a smidgeon of a negative and critical spirit

Yes bitterness is dangerous. Let's turn to Hebrews 12:15 CEV

Make sure that no one misses out on God's wonderful kindness. Don't let anyone become bitter and cause trouble for the rest of you.

Well... That is what God says about it...

Vernon Grounds, in the book called (Radical Commitment), tells about an experience that John Claypool and his sons had many years ago. Claypool was a businessman, the father of identical twin boys who from very early in life seemed inseparable. They dressed alike, looked alike, and did almost everything together.

After they were through school, they took over their dad's business, and they worked together so harmoniously that people in the community pointed to their relationship as a model of how people should cooperate with each other.

On one particular morning, a customer came into their store and made a small purchase. The brother who served him took the dollar bill, put it on top of the cash register, and walked along with the customer to the front door and chatted with him for a while.

After a few minutes, he went back to put the money into the drawer. But the dollar bill was gone! So he asked his brother, “Did you put a dollar bill into the cash register drawer?” His twin brother said, “I didn't see any dollar bill.”

The first brother was surprised. “That's funny,” he said, “I distinctly remember that I put it on top of the cash register.” A little later, he asked again, “Didn't you take that dollar bill and put it in the cash register?” This time the brother answered with some feeling, “No, I told you before that I didn't see it.”

Tension developed between those two brothers over that one single issue. Every time they discussed the matter, there were additional charges. The bitterness between them grew stronger and stronger, until eventually they broke their partnership. They split the store right down the middle, with each brother

owning his half. The community was drawn into the quarrel. For twenty years the two men, the business, and dozens of other people were troubled by feelings of anger.

Then one day a stranger drove into town. He came to the store which had been divided down the middle, walked into one side, and said to the white-haired owner of the store, “How long have you been in business here?” When the owner told him that it had been for many years, the stranger said, “Then I’ve got something I must get squared up with you.”

“Twenty years ago,” he said, “I was unemployed and homeless, wandering around the country. One morning I jumped off the freight train I was riding, here in your town. I walked down a back alley hoping to find something to eat. Through the open door of this store, I saw a cash register with a dollar bill on top. Nobody was there. Only two men were up front. So I sneaked in and stole the dollar bill.”

He went on to explain that he had since become a Christian, and now his conscience was bothered by guilt. He had come to make restitution. He decided to return to this area where he had committed a number of wrongs, confess his theft, and pay whatever the store owners thought was due them!

The white-haired owner listened with tears running down his cheeks. When he gained his composure, he said, “Come with me, I want you to tell the same story to my brother.” He walked into the other half of the store, and before long those twin brothers were weeping in each other’s arms! There had been twenty years of hostility, twenty years of resentment, and twenty years of harsh bitterness—all of it over a simple misunderstanding!

Our churches have people like that—people who harbour resentment, perhaps not as dramatic as this particular case was, but the resentment is still there. It involves one person against another, one family against another, and feelings of bitterness because of resentment about old wounds. The disagreements are sometimes misunderstandings over inheritance money, differences over theological convictions, or jealousy over things that fifty years from now will be meaningless. May God deliver us from being bitter and resentful! May He help us to refuse to let the little fox of bitterness invade our lives!

I will briefly cover one more little fox:

The little fox called “Un-Forgiveness”

God says in Ephesians 4:32 and in Luke 6:37 that we are to forgive others. The two verses tell us to be kind to one another, to be tenderhearted, to forgive one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven each of us. Jesus said that we are to: "Forgive and you shall be forgiven"

Each of these foxes tie hand in hand... Do we truly believe that we have been forgiven for our sin or do we simply see ourselves as good people above sin. I believe that we cannot truly forgive and be gracious to others until we embrace the forgiveness that was given to us. It is in this way that we truly comprehend the depth of forgiveness. When we embrace this truth it is easy for us because he has forgiven us of more that we can fathom, so who are we to withhold forgiveness from those who wrong us. Is it easy? No! Emphatically not, but it is nevertheless what we are told to do.

I was thinking of Humboldt and the driver who killed all of those young athletes. Do you think it was, or is easy for the parents of those children to forgive? How about the wife who's husband leaves her for another woman or the husband who's wife leaves him for another woman? What about the driver who ignored the bus flashing signals and ran over and killed a woman's 6 year old son? What about the church member who slaps you behind your back to others?

When I said it is hard, I mean it is really hard. Yet it is what is expected of us.

Do you remember the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6? What comes right after it in verses 14,15?

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:

But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The little foxes are many and varied. They can be somewhat obvious or they can be sneaky and insidious. Today we looked at the little foxes of: Thoughtlessness, Self-Centredness, Bitterness and unforgiveness.

When we are diligent in driving out these little foxes. When we eliminate these little foxes, we start to see an abundance of peace, grace and fruit. This abundance that living in obedience to Christ and in accordance with his will brings is life and fruitful gardens that bring glory to God.