

The Walk in the Fields and Among the Vineyards

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon emphasizes the importance of separating from the world, sin, and self in order to enjoy communion with Christ and experience the love of God.

Topics: "Spiritual Communion", "Christ's Love"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the intimate relationship between Christ and His church, using the metaphor of a bridegroom and bride delighting in each other's company. He highlights the importance of spiritual communion, self-examination, and the pursuit of tender graces and gospel fruit in the believer's life. Philpot emphasizes the need for believers to walk hand in hand with Christ, examining their hearts and seeking the manifestation of His everlasting, dying, pardoning, forbearing, and restoring love in their lives.

Transcript

Preached at North Street Chapel, Stamford, on January 5, 1862, by J. C. Philpot.

"Come, My beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages. Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vines flourish, whether the tender grapes appear, and the pomegranates bud forth - there will I give you My loves." Song of Solomon 7:11-12

I do not often preach from the Song of Solomon, and this chiefly for two reasons. First, though this holy book is full of rich and choice experience, it is couched for the most part in language so figurative and allegorical that it needs more grace and wisdom than I possess to be sure I would always give the correct interpretation of the figures employed for that purpose by the blessed Spirit. And, secondly, the church of God, generally speaking, is not in a state fit to understand, receive and experimentally realize the lessons of holiness and truth contained in this portion of the Word of God.

The Song of Solomon, as you well know, is a sacred nuptial song, and may be generally described as conveying the mutual expression of the love of Christ and of the church under the figure of a bridegroom and a bride delighting in each other's company, and giving vent to their affection in tender, yet chaste and holy language. But the church of God at present is rather a lone widow than a joyous bride; rather spends her time in fasting than in feasting; is rather complaining than courting; and rather sits by the rivers of Babylon with her harp hung upon the willows than pours forth in sweet melody the songs of Zion.

But the difficulties which I have named are neither of them insuperable. As regards the first objection, though much of the Song of Solomon is so allegorical and figurative as often to elude our endeavors to understand its spiritual meaning, yet there are figures in it which we seem in some sense able clearly and experimentally to comprehend as seen through the thin mist of the allegory; and, as regards the second difficulty, there are passages also which meet the present experience of the children of God, because, though expressions of love, yet are they couched rather in the language of tender desire than of actual enjoyment.

Take, for instance, such a passage as - "Because of the aroma of Your good ointments, Your name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love You." So 1:3 Any true believer who has ever felt Christ's name to be sweet and precious can understand the experience contained in those words, even though in many points his faith may fall short of full assurance or present enjoyment.

So again, "Draw me, and I will run after You." So 1:4 There we have the experience of a soul longing to be drawn by "cords of love and bands of a Man," and to run after Jesus that it may overtake Him, gain possession of Him, and follow in His footsteps, all which may fall very short of full assurance.

Again, "By night on my bed I sought Him whom my soul loves - I sought Him, but I found Him not." So 3:1 There we have the experience of a soul, mourning under desertion and the hidings of God's face, seeking the Lord, and yet unable to realize His presence or His power.

"Who is this that comes up from the wilderness, leaning upon her Beloved?" So 8:5 There we have the expression of a true-hearted child of God coming up out of this wilderness world, cleaving to Jesus with purpose of heart and leaning upon Him with all his strength, as the only object of his warm affection.

Almost all these passages are couched in figurative language, yet easily intelligible, and certainly not beyond the experience of the greater part of the family of God.

We shall perhaps find, if God helps me this morning to bring forth the choice experience of our text, the words before us to possess both of these characters. First, though the language is highly metaphorical, yet is it sufficiently intelligible through the light veil of allegory to present us with a visible portrait, and that no less than of a face beaming with the light and beauty of a very gracious experience; and yet, secondly, the experience thus portrayed in it is not of a character so high in spiritual enjoyment as to be beyond the reach of those who know something of the breathing forth of the sincerity of love into the bosom of the Redeemer.

Let us then approach the words as they present themselves to us in the express language of the blessed Spirit, and see whether we cannot gather up from them some spiritual instruction, or gracious encouragement, or divine consolation, or profitable admonition.

I. Observe, first, the invitation which Christ--for He is the speaker here--addresses to His beloved to accompany Him in His evening walk of love - "Come, My beloved let us go forth."

II. Secondly, the place where He invites her to go in company with Him. "Let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages."

III. Thirdly, the object of their journeying together thus hand in hand - "Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vines flourish, whether the tender grapes appear, and the pomegranates bud forth."

IV. Fourthly, the entertainment which He promises her when they have gone through their survey - "There will I give you My loves."

I. The INVITATION which Christ addresses to His beloved to accompany Him in His evening walk of love - "Come, My beloved let us go forth." I have just hinted my opinion that it is our Lord who speaks here. The commentators, I believe, and among them I may name Dr. Gill, ascribe the words to the church; but, according to my view of the subject, they are much more appropriate in the lips of the Redeemer. Let me give you my reason. The invitation, "Come, My beloved," seems to fall with more propriety from the lips of the bridegroom than from those of the bride. He leads, she follows. He draws, she runs. He invites her to come - she listens to His invitation, and gladly takes hold of His offered hand. Is not this more suitable, more becoming their mutual relationship? Would it not be so between lovers naturally? Is it not more becoming maidenly modesty to be asked than to ask, to be courted than to court, to be invited to take an evening walk than to give the invitation? But when we look at the exalted dignity of the heavenly Bridegroom, full though He be of most gracious condescension, it must strike us at once upon higher grounds that it is more becoming for the Lord to give the invitation to the church to walk with Him than for the church to invite Him to walk with her.

1. But now look at the tender expression by which he addresses her - "My beloved." This is His language throughout the whole Song to His spouse and bride. Whatever the church is in herself, and no language can describe the depths of her debasement through the Fall, she is dear and near to the heart of Christ. Two things must always strike us with wonder, and I may say holy admiration, when we can realize them experimentally in our own bosom.

First, that Christ, viewed by faith as the eternal Son of God in all the glory of His uncreated Deity, should ever have loved any of the human race at all. Did you ever attempt to realize the feeling that He, who is eternally God, should ever have condescended to love a creature like man? When I say "love," I do not mean that general approbation which God has as a Creator in the works of His hands, but that warmth of peculiar and tender affection, which we mean by the term. Is it not sufficient to fill our mind with wonder that the great and glorious, self-existent I AM should love a finite creature such as man? We can understand how equals can love equals, or even superiors love inferiors when the disparity is not very great; but that He who fills heaven with His glory should love, with all the warmth of infinite affection, man, the creature of His hand--this indeed is a mystery.

David felt this when he said, after a contemplation of the glories of the starry heavens, "What is man that You are mindful of him? and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and have crowned him with glory and honor." Psalm 8:4,5 Such also was Solomon's feeling when he had built the temple. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain You - how much less this house that I have built?" 1Ki 8:27 But when we consider what man is, not only as a finite, but as a fallen creature; when we contrast the purity and holiness of God with the impurity and defilement of man; and when we bear in mind how hateful sin is in the eyes of Him who cannot look upon iniquity, well may we stand astonished that a God so holy should love sinners so vile.

But the second thing is calculated also to strike us with wonder and admiration. The mystery, which never can be fathomed in this life and most probably will be equally unfathomable in the life to come, is that God should have loved some, and not have loved others. Why He should have loved Jacob and hated Esau, chosen David and rejected Saul, are mysteries inscrutable to creature intellect. But though unfathomable

by the line of human reason, they are still truths as clearly revealed in the Word of God as those doctrines which lie more within the compass of our understanding; and therefore should be received in faith, not caviled at through unbelief. It will be our mercy, instead of puzzling our minds over this mystery, still less caviling at it, to have such a testimony in our own conscience as Paul had of old, when he could say, in the full assurance of faith, "He loved me and gave Himself for me."

When, then, we look at the church in her present fallen condition, we may stand astonished that our gracious Lord should feel any love towards her. But so it is. Love is self-moving. Even in natural love, none can tell the source from which it springs. All we know of it is that it flows freely, of its own self-movement, towards its object. So it is with divine love - it flows forth spontaneously without seeking any other cause but its own self-movement, or any other object but that to which it softly yet strongly tends. "God," we read, "is love." 1Jo 4:8 That is His name; that is His nature. But if any ask why God loved any of the sons of men, all we can answer is, "Herein is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." 1Jo 4:10 And if any ask how we may know this love, all we can reply is, "And we have known and believed the love that God has to us. God is love, and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him." 1Jo 4:16

A. But love cannot exist without REQUITAL. Is not this true in human love? How many a poor girl has died of a broken heart from unrequited love! How many a man has been almost driven to desperation by the object of his affections breaking her engagement with him, and marrying another! It is in divine as in human love. Divine love needs requital. But there is this peculiar feature in divine love, and one in which it far exceeds all earthly affection, that it never knows the lack of requital; it never feels the lack of faithfulness. You may love an earthly object, and may have no requital. You may fix your affections upon one of the opposite sex and have them blighted, the object being unfaithful. But not so in heavenly love. It always meets with requital; it never meets with unfaithfulness.

But how can this be? Am I walking on sure and safe ground here, or advancing anything not in strict harmony with the Word of truth and the experience of the saints? Do you, then, think it possible that divine love can be thrown away? What is the cause of human love not being always requited? Is it not because the lover is not able to kindle a mutual flame in the bosom of the beloved? But can this be the case with divine love? To think so would be to cast a doubt on the power of the Almighty, as well as be expressly contrary to the Scriptures of truth. What do we read there? "We love Him because He first loved us." 1Jo 4:19 And again, "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us."

It is impossible, therefore, that divine love should be disappointed by meeting with no requital. It is true that you may sometimes doubt and fear whether Jesus loves you. But these very doubts and fears imply that you have some love toward Him; and if you love Him, you may be certain He loves you. Love to the Lord is a sure sign of a new and heavenly birth, "for every one who loves is born of God and knows God." 1Jo 4:7 And you may be certain also of His faithfulness to you, even though you are often unfaithful to Him; for those whom He loves, He loves to the end; and "if we believe not, yet He abides faithful - He cannot deny Himself." John 13:1 2Ti 2:13 If, therefore, He has once loved you, He will never leave you. Those two bitter drops which often turn the whole cup of human love into a draught of almost unmixed wormwood and gall, lack of requital and unfaithfulness, are never found in love divine. These two things, then, you may depend upon, if indeed you love Jesus with a pure heart fervently--that your love is requited by His; and that He will be faithful to every promise ever spoken by Him to your heart.

B. But love cannot exist without COMMUNION - the mutual enjoyment of each other's society. It is so in earthly, it is so in heavenly love. Our blessed Lord, therefore, speaking in the words before us, invites His beloved "to come," implying that she was to take His offered hand, that they might "go forth" in the enjoyment of each other's tender and affectionate society. She willingly accepts the offer. She is too pleased with His company not to listen when He invites. He leads, she follows; and hand in hand they go forth together.

2. But now look at the invitation couched in the expression, "Let us go forth." There is something very experimental in this kind and loving invitation; something that must not be passed over if we would bend our ear to listen to the voice of the Lord. He had already said, "Come." That was, so to speak, the calling note, the first sound of the love trumpet to rouse up the attention of the bride. She hears; she rises; she obeys the call; she takes the offered hand, and now the Lord says, "Let us go forth." The idea contained in the expression seems to be that Christ and the church are to go forth out of everything which can interrupt their mutual enjoyment of each other's society. The world is looked upon as a distracting place, like an over-crowded metropolis, full of noise, smoke, din and bustle, where their communion would be interrupted by every passer-by. In order, therefore, to enjoy sweet communion without interruption, He takes her by the hand and invites her to go forth with Him. But what is implied in the expression "going forth?"

A. Separation from everything which interferes with the love of Christ. He finds her in the WORLD, sometimes allured by, and entangled in its flesh-pleasing snares, and sometimes overborne with its burdensome anxieties. Forth, forth from both of these must the child of God go if he is to walk hand in hand with Jesus. It cannot be a trio--Jesus, the soul and the world. In natural love, a trio is no company. There must be two only to enjoy the wished-for society. So in grace; it must be Christ and the soul, the soul and Christ, or else there is, there can be, no sweet communion. The world must not interpose nor separate the two by turning its face into the midst, for it comes worse than a mere casual visitor, or an unwished-for interferer. It is a rival. And what can be worse company for two lovers than the presence of a rival? The love of the world and the love of Christ cannot dwell in the same bosom - "For if any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." 1Jo 2:15

The first step, then, toward communion with Christ is to come out of the world - "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing - and I will receive you." 2Co 6:17 If we are entangled in the love of the world, or fast bound and fettered with worldly anxieties, and the spirit of the world is rife in our bosom, all our profession will be vapid, if not worthless. We may use the language of prayer, but the heart is not in earnest; we may still manage to hold our head high in a profession of the truth, but its power and blessedness are neither known nor felt. To enjoy any measure of communion with the Lord, whether on the cross or on the throne, we must "go forth" from a world which is at enmity against Him.

B. So also there must be a going forth from all SIN. Christ never can have any fellowship with sin; for what fellowship has Christ with Belial? If we are indulging in any sin, secret or open, there can be no fellowship with the Lord the Lamb. We must go forth out of it and leave all its abominations behind. But how can we do this? How can we crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts? How can we deny ourselves; cut off right hands or pluck out right eyes; tear a beloved idol from the breast; and say to every iniquity, "Get behind me, Satan!" This we cannot do for ourselves; but the Lord can do it for us and in us. And this He does when He says, "Come forth." With the word of a king there is power; and by that power He can enable us to go forth out of all evil and out of everything hateful in His holy eyes.

C. But the invitation bids us also go forth out of the PROFESSING church. Christ is not there. There lies indeed the body, once animated with life divine; but the animating spirit is fled, and now there is nothing but a lifeless corpse. So it was with the church of old. The Lord once was "with the church in the wilderness" Acts 7:38; but the presence and the power of the Lord left it; and then that which was once the house of the Lord became the den of thieves. This going forth from the professing church was foreshadowed by the bodies of the beasts, whose blood was brought into the sanctuary, being burnt outside the camp. The apostle, therefore, says, "therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach." Heb 13:12,13 This I had to do now many years ago; for when I found and felt the power of God's truth upon my heart and conscience, I was as much obliged to "go forth" out of the professing church, as I was out of the world and out of sin.

4. But this invitation of Christ implies also that we must go forth which is the hardest thing of all to do out of SELF. It is easy in some measure to leave the world; easy to leave the professing church; and, though more difficult, yet there are cases in which people may even leave their sins, as the dog is said to have left his vomit, though he returned to it again. But to go forth out of self - there is the difficulty; for this "self" embraces such a variety of forms. Still, to deny it, renounce it, and go forth out of it lies at the very foundation of vital godliness. This was strikingly intimated by our blessed Lord when He said "Whoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" Mr 8:34

But what varied shapes and forms does this monster SELF assume! How hard to trace his windings! How difficult to track the wily foe to his hidden den, drag him out of the cave, and immolate him at the foot of the cross, as Samuel hewed down Agag in Gilgal. Proud self, righteous self, covetous self, ambitious self, sensual self, deceitful self, religious self, flesh-pleasing self--to detect, unmask, strip out of its multi-colored clothes and changeable suits of apparel, this ugly, mis-shaped creature, and then stamp upon it, as if one would crush with the heel of our boot its viper head; who will do such violence to beloved self, when every nerve quivers and shrinks, and the coward heart cries to the uplifted foot, "Spare, spare?" But does not the apostle say of himself, "I am crucified with Christ" Ga 2:20; "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus" Ga 6:17; "I fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh, for His body's sake." Col 1:24 All this is "suffering with Christ, that we also may be glorified together; a mortifying, through the Spirit, of the deeds of the body;" a being "always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh." Romans 8:13,17 2Co 4:11 Unless there is a going forth out of self by this self-crucifixion, there is no walking hand in hand with Christ, no manifest union, no heavenly communion with Him; for there can no more be a partnership between Christ, the soul and self, than there can be a partnership between Christ, the soul and sin.

II. But now let us direct our attention to our next point--the place of appointment, the meeting spot, to which the blessed Lord invites His beloved to go forth with Him - "Let us go forth into the FIELD." What is the leading idea here? There are several.

1. The first I shall name is that of leaving the noise, smoke and din of a large metropolis, where there is no privacy, no opportunity for retirement, for the quiet calm of a lonely field, where we may indulge in prayer and meditation, or retire into one's own bosom and commune with one's own heart. The sounds and sights, the bustle and confusion of the busy town often prevent that calm repose and sacred communion to which the Lord would invite His believing people. He would take, then, His beloved as if by her hand and lead her out of the noise and din of the crowded town that she might find opportunity for a little quiet meditation. Even naturally how pleasant it is to an inhabitant of the crowded metropolis to get away from

its smoke and din into the quiet country; and if a truly godly man, and blessed with a spirit of meditation, there to meditate upon the precious truth of God. Isaac, you will recollect, went out to meditate in the field at the evening time when he lifted up his eyes and saw the camels coming, announcing the arrival of the wife whom the Lord had found for him. I have myself found the field to be a suitable place for meditation, and often walk there on a Saturday evening for that purpose.

Thus the field in our text may represent the secret meditation of the soul. The saints of God in ancient days were much given to meditation. "My meditation of Him shall be sweet," Psalm 104:34 "O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day." Psalm 119:97 "When I remember You upon my bed and meditate on You in the night watches." Psalm 63:6 "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still." Psalm 4:4 Meditation is very profitable, and for ministers who would profit the church of God, it is indispensable. Paul therefore says to his beloved Timothy, "Meditate upon these things; give yourself wholly to them; that your profiting may appear to all." 1Ti 4:15 Meditation is to spiritual food what digestion is to natural food - without it there is no nourishment from the Word of truth.

But it is an employment that very few are able or willing to exercise themselves with; in fact, to meditate upon the Word of truth requires a spiritual mind, heavenly affections and a soul under special divine impressions, whereby sacred realities become not only suitable food, but the very element in which we live and move.

2. But again, "the field" may spiritually represent a place of secret prayer. How often even literally will the child of God go into the field that he may have an opportunity for pouring out his heart before the Lord! You who have families, some, it may be, surrounded and often sadly worried with crying children, living in small confined houses, with little opportunity for secret retirement, scarcely able perhaps to call your sleeping room your own; how gladly sometimes you go forth into the fields where no eye can see you but the eye of God, and no ear hear you but the ear of God, that you may pour out your heart without interruption! The very calm quiet of the field suits your frame. The soft fresh air blowing upon your face cheers and refreshes your body; the lark twittering in the sky; the face of lovely nature spread before your eyes; the pure solitude of the scene far away from the dusty roads and all sights and sounds of sin--all favor a spirit of prayer as you lift up your eyes and heart to heaven.

If you are in trouble, there you may groan unheard; if dejected, there you may sigh, and neither wife nor child catch the sound; if favored with access to the throne, there you may have communion with the Lord; and there, if time allows, you may sometimes stay in the grassy field until the shadows of evening gather around you, and the stars shine forth in all their beauty and glory. Then you can go to your home refreshed and strengthened with your walk in the field, for the Lord has gone forth there with you, and His company is the best of all. Thus the field may fitly represent that secret prayer which is the very life of the soul, and without which there can be no communion with the Lord of life and glory.

3. But "the field" also may signify a place of self-examination; for it may spiritually imply retirement, thought, solitude, quiet, being alone with God. People for the most part hate solitude. They love to live in a crowd, and thus, for the most part, escape the torment of being alone. How many of those who we hope fear God seem to be afraid of self-examination! And why is this, but because they fear that self-examination may bring things to light which might cover them with shame, and they are unwilling to be humbled or put their mouth in the dust?

But how good self-examination sometimes is! Does not the apostle say, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you--unless, of course, you fail the test?" 2 Cor. 13:5 And again, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup." 1Co 11:28 How the Psalmist seems as it were to spread himself out before the Lord as he walked in this field of self-examination - "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Psalm 139:23,24

But let me give the words a somewhat more enlarged signification. When the Lord says to His beloved, "Let us go forth into the field," it would seem as if He invited her to go with Him hand in hand, and see what was spread before their view. In His company, and taught by His Spirit and grace, she would see what she could not, with her own unassisted vision, ever observe.

4. He would bid her, for instance, look, first, at the field of creation. What an ample field of meditation is here; and how delightful it is to leave the crowded city and look upon the calm and quiet face of nature! But how much more sweet it is to be able to do this with a spiritual mind, and to receive from it heavenly delight! Then as you view the sun walking in his brightness, or see the moon illuminating the dark night, and the stars glittering like so many diamonds in the sky, how the glory of God shines forth as thus traced out in these beautiful heavens! Men enjoy the warmth of the sun, or the light of the moon, and look, some with careless and some with admiring eyes, upon the constellations of the heavens; but how few see that the hand of God gave to them their being, and how fewer still can say, in the language of Cowper, "My Father made them all!" But we cannot see this field of creation with believing eyes except we walk hand in hand with Christ, His grace enlightening the heart and His glory illuminating the soul.

5. But there is another field--the field of providence; and into that field, as in the preceding, we can only go forth, so as to take of it a believing view, as we can walk hand in hand with Christ. The field of providence is full of various paths, and these are often so intricate that we would soon lose our way unless we had such an unerring Guide and Companion. Now when the Lord is pleased to take us hand in hand and lead us into the field of providence, then, whichever way we look, we see that "all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep His covenant and His testimonies." Psalm 25:10

Look back and see the path of providence in which the Lord has hitherto led you up and down this wilderness world from your very infant days, and you will find mercy stamped upon every part of it. You could not indeed see it at the time, for the Lord "brings the blind by a way that they know not;" but you see it now, if at least you are walking in the field hand in hand with the Lord. However crooked that path once apparently was, it is now all made straight; however it seemed then to diverge from the right way, and almost to lose itself in a tangled maze, yet it is now seen all to have tended to one center.

But, if blessed with a living faith as you are walking with the Lord in this field, you can also look forward as well as backward, and believe that as the Lord has appeared thus far as a kind God in providence, He will ever still appear in the same way on your behalf--that He will never leave nor forsake you, but be ever opening fresh fields for admiring and adoring His wondrous hand in providing for your needs.

But we are not always nor often here. How often we take, as it were, our hand out of the Lord's and then we grope for the wall like the blind--we grope as if we had no eyes! Then we feel, when we are not walking hand in hand with the Lord, the field of providence is obscured, its paths become perplexing and confused, and, having lost the hand which holds the clue, we see little else but an inextricable labyrinth.

6. Then again there is the field of experience; and what a copious field is that in which to walk with Christ as your guide! But how faint our steps, unless we can walk in this field also hand in hand with the Lord! If, however, seeing light in His light, you take a view of the Lord's dealings with your soul, and look at all you have passed through in your mind from the day when the Spirit first quickened you into spiritual life, what a field is spread before you! The sighs and groans that have gone up out of your bosom; the tears which have dropped from your eyes; the convictions of sin which have pierced your conscience; the mournings after the Lord and over your sins and backslidings--can you not see the leadings and teachings of the blessed Spirit here?

Look, also, again at the first breakings in of mercy upon your soul; the dawning beams of light upon your mind; the promise applied; the Person and work, the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus discovered; and salvation brought home with a divine power to your heart--what a field of sweet and gracious experience the soul can sometimes see spread before its eyes which at other times is hidden from view! But O how different it is to cast one's eyes over this field without Christ and with Him! Without Him all is darkness; with Him all is light.

7. Then, again, look at the Scriptures; what a field there is spread before our eyes in the inspired Word! What holy truths, what encouraging invitations, what comforting promises, what gracious precepts, what a field of richest, choicest treasure does the inspired Word contain for the soul to walk in hand in hand with the blessed Lord! As He guides it through the sacred page, illuminating the whole with heavenly light, how it testifies of Him both in Old Testament and New! Of Him all the prophets speak; to Him all the rites and ceremonies point, for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy; and as He is the Word incarnate, so is He the sum and substance of the Word written.

But He must walk with us in this sacred field, and do to us as He did to His disciples - "Then opened He their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures." Luke 24:45 What is all DOCTRINE without him? Separate from Christ, from His power and presence, doctrine is but notion, speculation and mere opinion. What again are the PROMISES separate from Christ? Unmeaning declarations. For "all the promises of God in Him are yes and in Him Amen" 2Co 1:20; and therefore out of Him they are neither "yes" nor "Amen," that is, they have no affirmation and no confirmation. And again, what are the PRECEPTS distinct from Christ? Burdensome commands, without end or motive for their performance. We see, then, how needful it is to possess the power and presence of Christ in the whole field of heavenly truth and in every portion of it.

But we will now advance to another invitation from the same gracious lips and addressed in a similar manner to the church - "Let us lodge in the VILLAGES." It is as if the Lord said to her, "Now we have spent the day together in the field, seeing the beauty and glory of God in these various departments of providence and grace. Night is coming on; where shall we tarry during the night season? We will not go back to the noisy town. Tomorrow will bring us fresh employment in the calm, quiet country; but we cannot stay all night in the field. Let us lodge in the village." Of course there is spiritual instruction communicated here. Let us see, then, if we can gather up the divine meaning of the words.

1. These villages, taking a spiritual view of them, seem to represent gospel churches. Villages are naturally distinct from the great metropolis, and yet they are different from solitary houses. We may view them, then, as little clusters of habitations gathered out of the world, not town houses situated in all the smoke and din and noise of the thronged streets, but quiet abodes in the country, far, far away from the bustling city. As, then, the Lord invites His bride to lodge with Him in the villages, they seem to be places

in which she could lay her head down and sweetly enjoy the rest to which He invites her. But how does this agree with the other part of the invitation to go forth into the field? In this way - there is not only enjoying sweet communion with the Lord in the field, but there is enjoying sweet communion with His people in the church.

As, then, we are brought into spiritual union and communion with those who fear God, and especially by being members of a gospel church, there is a lodging of the soul in the village; there is a finding rest and repose, not only in the enjoyment of the Lord's presence, but in the love and affection which Christians mutually bear to each other. And though this mutual love and affection among the members of the mystical body of Christ be not frequent in our day, yet still there is a measure of it enjoyed by every quickened soul; for love to the brethren is the first evidence of the work of grace upon the heart, according to God's own testimony - "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death." 1Jo 3:14

2. Yet it is after all but lodging in the villages, merely tarrying for a night, enjoying just a short space of refreshment in the company of those who fear God, but no long permanence of Christian communion, through the various circumstances which often disturb Christian harmony and peace. How few churches really walk in mutual love and affection! What strife and division, what jealousies and suspicious coldness, if not unkindness, often divide the churches of Christ! But when Christ and the bride are together in the enjoyment of each other's company, then it is well with the villages; then does union prevail in the churches; and in that peace and union Christ and His bride can lie down together in the silent watches of the night.

III. The OBJECT of their journeying together thus hand in hand - "Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vines flourish, whether the tender grapes appear, and the pomegranates bud forth." Their morning's work is already decided upon. If they repose for the night in the village, it is only that they may in the morning examine the village crops and see for themselves what fruit is to be borne by them. There was work to be done which could best be done in company. They had had a season of mutual communion in the field; they had spent the night in the villages in communion with the churches that fear God, obey His precepts, walk in His ways, and keep His ordinances. But there was work to be done in the early morning.

1. "Let us get up early to the vineyards." I have observed in Scripture how much is said of getting up early in the morning. We have in Abraham's remarkable history three different intimations of his rising early in the morning; and they were three very important occasions in Abraham's life.

The first instance of his getting up early was after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, when he rose up early to see whether God had heard his prayer for the deliverance of Lot; and he saw from afar, almost with the dawning light, that the smoke of the accursed cities of the plain rose up as the smoke of a mighty furnace. Ge 19:27,28

The next was when he had to send away Hagar - "And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread and a bottle of water and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder and the child, and sent her away." Ge 21:14 Being obliged by Sarah's indignation at Ishmael's mockery to remove that thorn out of her side, and assured by God's own word that he would hearken unto her voice, he no longer delayed obedience. He felt deeply the stroke, yet he rose up early in the morning to show that he would no longer harbor in his house one that was an enemy to his wife's repose, and that in doing so he was doing the will

of God from the heart.

The third time he rose up early in the morning was the most painful act in the whole history of Abraham's life, when he took his son Isaac to offer him as a burnt offering upon the very spot on which the temple was afterwards built.

But we do not understand the expression here in its literal sense; we give it a spiritual meaning, as implying activity and diligence. I have, however, observed there is very little good to be expected from people who accustom themselves to lie in bed all morning; it argues an indolent body and an indolent mind. But of course the Lord here speaks figuratively as implying that diligence of soul which is manifested by a diligent body in getting up early, and not losing precious moments on a bed of sloth.

2. But WHERE did the Lord invite His bride to go with Him in the early morning? To the vineyards. Now this spiritually and experimentally describes a searching examination into the state of the churches as they lie naked and open before that holy and heart-searching God with whom we have do. Christ and His bride had been walking in holy communion with each other; they had been lodging in the villages in sweet communion with the churches, and now they were to go together upon a tour of examination. They were to direct their steps towards the vineyards, to see what was going on there, how the vines looked, whether they were healthy, whether the grapes had been well ripened, whether the foliage was strong and verdant, and what prospects they generally presented of fruit for that year. The figure, of course, was adapted to that country and climate. As in our country, farmers get up early in the morning to inspect the state of their flocks and herds, and to look over their fields so as to form some judgment of their present and future state, so in Palestine, where vineyards were the chief productions of the country, their owners and cultivators would naturally rise up early in the morning to examine the state of their vines. In the Scripture the vineyard is a standing figure of the church of God. "My well beloved has a vineyard in a very fruitful hill" Isaiah 5:1; and so our Lord speaks. "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it out to tenant farmers." Luke 20:9

Now, as a vineyard is a collection of vines and thus typifies a church, so each vine may be considered as typifying an individual believer as one of the church, When, then, the Lord had said to His beloved, "Let us get up early to the vineyards," He adds, "Let us see if the vines flourish," that is, let us look at individual cases. Thus, every believer should examine the state of his soul before God, and that with all that diligence, earnestness, and activity which are shadowed forth by getting up early for the work. Do not you think that it would be good sometimes thus to examine the state of your soul before God? Might you not sometimes well ask yourself, "Is my soul flourishing? Does it wear a healthy aspect? How does it look, viewed by a spiritual eye?"

When the farmer goes into his field, he can see in a moment whether the crop is healthy or not, whether there is worm at the root, or disease on the stem, or blight in the ear. When an experienced gardener goes into a vinery, he can see at a glance the exact state of the vines. The appearance of the foliage and the general aspect of the vines show in a moment to his experienced eye whether the worm or bug is infesting the house. It requires no minute examination; as disease in the human body manifests itself at once to the experienced physician, so a skillful eye detects at a glance disease in the vinery.

So it is, or should be, in grace. If I have a spiritual eye, directly I look into my soul, I can see whether it is healthy or unhealthy, whether the leaves of my profession be curled and mildewed, or whether they be green and verdant and give promise of a good crop. Think of the farmer who never goes into his barn-yard

to examine the state of his flocks and herds, and who is too idle even to walk the breadth of his farm to see the state of his crops! Is such a man fit to be a farmer? What can such a man expect as his end but the workhouse? So the Christian, who has a crop of far more importance than all the wheat that grows in the farmer's fields, and of more value than all the sheep of the farm, should look into the state of his soul to see whether it be flourishing or not.

If prayer, if praise, if reading the Scriptures, if self-examination, if meditation, if faith, hope and love, and other graces of the Spirit are all active, lively and vigorous, then the vine is flourishing. If prayer is cold, formal and dead; if the Scriptures are little read or with a careless eye; if there be no self-examination, no meditation, no spirituality of mind, no going forth of faith and affection--then the vine is not flourishing. There is something wrong at the root.

To use gardening language, the grapes sometimes "shank off," that is, become dry, shrunken and sour. The cause of this generally is, I believe, that there is something wrong at the root; that they have been chilled with the cold rains, and therefore the root has become unhealthy. In almost every plant it is at the root that disease begins. If ever you see even a plant in a flower-pot unhealthy, depend upon it there is something wrong at the root. It is over-watered or under-watered, or from some other cause the root has become diseased, and root-development is suspended or unhealthy.

So it is in religion; if there is anything wrong with a man, it is almost sure to be something wrong at the root. "The root of the matter," Job said, "is found in me." Job could appeal unto God that the root of his religion was right. If "the root" had been wrong, "the fruit" would not have been right; but as long as the root was sound, it would put forth fruit in due time. If a man's religion has no root, or if the root be injured by disease, it will be sure to discover itself in his profession. He cannot have a prosperous soul--prosperous inwardly and prosperous outwardly--unless the root be deep in the soil, and unless it be full of living fibers, drawing up secret nourishment from that river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God. Then he shall be "like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they go right on producing delicious fruit." Jer 17:8

3. Connected with this, therefore, comes the next question, whether "the tender GRAPES appear." The first look was at the general appearance of the vine. Was the stem well ripened; were the leaves well and fully grown; was there any appearance of mildew, blight, caterpillar, or any other noxious thing in operation to destroy the prospect of the crop? Well, if the first view were satisfactory, if the general aspect of the vine were favorable, now comes a closer examination to see whether "the tender grapes" are appearing. Where is the opening blossom? If there be no blossom, there will be no fruit; and if there are no buddings of the tender grapes, we shall look in vain when autumn comes for ripe clusters.

These "tender grapes," spiritually viewed, seems to signify the tender graces of the soul. Depend upon it, nothing is more opposed to vital godliness than hardness of heart in the things of God. The tender conscience, the humble mind, the broken heart, the contrite spirit - these are true and scriptural marks and evidences of the grace of God. In fact you will find that every grace of the Spirit partakes of this tenderness. Grace is an exotic; it is not a native plant. It cannot stand the frost, nor the cold north winds. It comes from the warm climate of heaven, and needs careful nourishing that it may live and grow.

Thus these tender grapes may represent that fear of God in the heart which makes the conscience tender; those inward actings of faith, whereby, as with so many tendrils, the Person and work of Christ are laid

hold of; the first tender sensations of opening love toward the Lord, when, by some discovery of Himself, He for the first time makes Himself precious to the believing heart; the tender claspings of a good hope through grace, which lay hold of the finished work of the Son of God.

The tender grapes may also spiritually represent the tender sensations of the soul under divine teaching, whereby it mourns over sin, laments its shortcomings and looks to the Lord with weeping eyes and sorrowful heart for pardon and peace. If we see no tender grapes in the spring, there will certainly be no rich, ripe clusters in the autumn. Full fruit indeed was not yet come; but this is what the Lord was looking for--whether the tender grapes were budding out of the stem or opening their bloom. To me there is nothing more sickening than the hardness which one sees in so many of our preachers and professors. The dry, hard way in which they preach the most solemn doctrinal truths of the gospel is most repulsive to a spiritual mind, and makes one greatly fear whether such men ever knew anything of the power of truth for themselves in a tender conscience.

4. But there was also something else which the Lord in company with his bride was to look for - "And the POMEGRANATES bud forth." The pomegranate is a fruit not peculiar to, but very common in the Holy Land, and is distinguished by a bright green leaf and a beautiful crimson flower, followed by a rich, ripe, red fruit, of which the juice is peculiarly luscious and sweet. The Holy Spirit therefore seems to have taken the pomegranate throughout Scripture as an emblem of choice gospel fruit. The high priest wore upon his robe pomegranates intermingled with golden bells. The golden bells sounded his approach in the tabernacle and loudly proclaimed his coming; but the pomegranates silently proclaimed that he was to bear fruit unto God as well as sound forth his praise.

It would seem from the Scripture that there was something peculiarly delicious in the juice of the pomegranate, and that it was mingled with wine to give the latter more flavor. Thus, the spouse says, "I would cause You to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranates." So 8:2 As a delicious fruit they were therefore planted in Hebrew gardens - "Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits." So 4:13

Thus the pomegranate, as a spiritual emblem, signifies gospel fruit. The Lord and His church went forth therefore hand in hand to examine whether these pomegranates were budding forth--whether, in other words, there was promise of fruit in the churches. They were not looking in the expectation of finding pomegranates fit to be gathered; they did not go so far as that. Being the time of spring when they took their morning walk, fruit was not yet to be found upon the bough. Their examination was directed rather to see whether there was any appearance of a future crop.

By this is intimated that the Lord deals very tenderly and gently with the soul, not expecting ripe fruit in the spring, but examining what marks there were of divine teaching in the early bud. Do you ever look into your soul to see whether these pomegranates are budding forth; to search and examine what semblance you can find of the graces of the Spirit; what buddings forth of hope and love you can trace out; what marks of heavenly teaching, what tokens or testimonies of interest in the blood and love of the Lamb, and what prospects for eternity?

But how true it is that we cannot see these fruits in ourselves, whatever measure there be of them, except in company with Christ! Christ does not invite the bride to look into her own heart, except in His company; but when favored with His presence and smile, she may look and see whether the pomegranates are budding forth. And they will always bud forth when she is in company with the Lord, for then His grace is in

operation; and when His grace is in operation, then the tender grapes give a good smell and the pomegranates richly bloom.

But if we look into our heart in seasons of darkness, desertion and desolation, we shall see no fruit there. These tender blossoms shut up their leaves in the cold north wind; they are afraid to come forth except when the sun shines. When the sun shines, the tender grapes appear and the pomegranates bud forth; for in the presence of the Lord there is a springing up of every Christian grace. Thus you see that the Lord does not invite us to be poring over our heart to find what good there is in the dark night of cold desertion. Does He not say, "Let us get up early to the vineyards," as if to see them under the beams of the rising sun, and as favored with His company? If the bride had gone forth into the vineyard without Him or in the dark night, what would she have seen of the appearing of the tender grapes, or of the budding forth of the early pomegranates?

IV. But this brings us to our fourth and last point; the entertainment which He has promised to give His beloved bride when the tender grapes appear and the pomegranates bud forth - "There will I give you My loves." If we are all in darkness and confusion, doubting and fearing as to the reality of the work of grace upon our soul, there is no seeing anything of the tender grape, no viewing anything of the budding of the pomegranate. They may be there blooming and budding, but we cannot see them. But when the Lord is pleased to cheer us with His presence and company, then we see light in His light, and behold, in the teaching of His Spirit, what is hidden from us when in a state of darkness and desertion. It is for this reason He says, "There will I give you My loves." Observe the expression, "loves," in the plural number. And may we not well ask what "loves" are these? They are many.

1. There is first His EVERLASTING love; for He says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn you." It is a sense of Christ's everlasting love which rejoices the soul when shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit. For if this love had beginning, it might have ending. But being from eternity, it reaches to eternity.

2. Then there is DYING love--the love our Lord displayed in dying upon the cross for such poor miserable wretches as we feel ourselves to be. If we can but view His dying love upon the cross, and have a sweet testimony that He loved us and gave Himself for us, then, under the constraint of this dying love, we can give Him all our heart, hate sin with a perfect hatred, desire to be conformed to His suffering image, and be found walking in His blessed footsteps.

3. Then there is PARDONING love, when He is pleased to bless the soul with a sight and sense of His atoning blood, and reveals that love which was stronger than death and triumphed over death and hell.

4. Then there is His FORBEARING love, bearing with all our misbehavior, backslidings, wanderings and transgressions, which is never provoked to give us utterly up, though we deserve to be abandoned for our sins and crimes forever and ever.

5. Then there is His RESTORING love--"He restores my soul"--whereby He restores us out of a state of carnality, darkness, and death, lifts up once more the light of His countenance and enables us once more to love Him with a pure heart fervently.

All these and other flowings forth of His love are spoken of here as His "loves." And these He gives to His child, of His own free grace--uncalled for, unmerited, undeserved, the spontaneous effusion of His own heart, which is full of the tenderest affection to all who love and fear His great name.

Was it not well worth going forth to enjoy all this? Was it not a blessed journey for His spouse and bride, when she could leave the world and sin and self behind, and go forth in such sweet company? O that we might be thus blessed! What is there worth living for or dying for but this? But how rare for the soul to be thus favored! And yet, say what men will, there is no real happiness anywhere else but in this knowledge and enjoyment of the love of Christ; no real separation from the world by any other power than this; no other real fitness for the inheritance of the saints in light but what this union and communion with the Lord reveals and seals.

May the Lord of His infinite mercy establish these truths in our heart, favor us from time to time with the sweet experimental enjoyment of them, and give us to live and die in His most blessed embrace!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-philpot/the-walk-in-the-fields-and-among-the-vineyards/>

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