

Hear the parable of the fox and the chickens: The Great Farmer raised some chickens for Himself, and placed them in a wonderful farmyard called Jerusalem. In the middle of this farmyard, He built a magnificent coop called the temple, where the chickens could come and be fed, and where they would be kept safe.

But the chickens forgot the Farmer, and let the coop fall into disrepair. They starting looking elsewhere for food and safety. They soon encountered a friendly fox who loved the idea of a yard full of chickens. He turned out to be more than willing to help them repair their coop, and he loved those chickens so much that he moved in and lived very close to them. Strangely, in spite of his help and his promises to protect them, he kept growing fatter and fatter, while the chickens grew fewer and weaker.

The Farmer knew what the fox was really up to, and despite the fact that the chickens had forgotten Him and turned away from Him, He sent many farmhands to clear the fox and his influence out of the yard, to keep the chickens safe. But the chickens just pecked them to pieces while the fox smiled a sly smile and brushed a few feathers from his mouth.

Finally the Farmer sent a mother Hen to gather those foolish chickens under her wings and save them from the fox. This Hen was sent to come between the fox and the chickens, to protect them and shelter them. And so the Hen began far away, well outside the yard, healing the sick and injured chickens who had wandered off from the coop, but she was steadily making her way towards the yard. A few of the wiser chickens who appreciated what the Hen was doing realized what would happen if the Hen got too near the fox, and came to warn the Hen not to come any closer. "Get away from here, for the fox wants to kill you."

The Hen replied, "You tell that fox, "Behold, I will heal and help these chicks today and tomorrow, and on the third day, I will make it to the coop. The fox and his threats cannot keep me from coming to the coop to save the chickens. Even though the threat of death hangs over the yard, nevertheless, I must continue caring for my brood all the way to the coop, because that is where heart of this corruption is. That is where everyone that the Farmer sends always dies."

But as the Hen drew nearer and nearer to the yard with the coop at the center, more and more chickens began to peck at Her, protesting that she was causing problems for them. "The Farmer doesn't want trouble and bloodshed in His yard. Stay away, Mother Hen, and stop trying to cram us all under your wings!" Again and again the Hen sought to save the chickens, and again and again they refused her help. They ran away from the Hen, back into the path of the fox.

When it became clear that instead of crying out for the Hen's help, the chickens who ruled the roost were actually in league with the fox, the Hen sadly declared that the coop was no longer

a place of food and safety for the chickens. It would do them no good to run to the shelter of the coop, because the fox was already inside. The Hen foretold that since it had become a fox's den, the coop that the Farmer had made to be a place of blessing and safety and peace for the chickens would be destroyed. The Farmer was finished with the coop. The only place left to receive the Farmer's blessing was under the wings of the Hen that He had sent.

And the only *way* those chickens would receive that blessing was if they changed their attitude toward the Hen. The chickens needed to stop treating the Mother Hen as a nuisance and a threat to their way of life. They needed to stop trusting the fox. They needed to acknowledge that the Mother Hen was the one sent by the Farmer to save them, and they needed to run for safety under Her wings, *blessing* the one the Farmer had sent instead of cursing.

Thus far, the story of the fox and the chickens from Luke 13:31-35. But I can't stop there. I'm too excited about how it ends. Let me rush to the finish.

The Mother Hen did exactly what she promised. She kept heading straight for the yard, straight for the coop, straight into the fox's jaws. She sacrificed herself for all the chickens who had taken refuge under her wings, all of the ones who had seen Her for what she really was, a blessing sent by the Farmer! When she got to the coop, the fox's hench-chickens seized her and handed her over to the fox, and the fox *killed* that Hen and *devoured* her. The chickens who had come to love the Hen were heartbroken.

But then a strange and wonderful thing happened: the fox got terribly sick for three days, and on third day, the fox *died*, and out came the Hen! The fox ate the Hen, but the fox was the one who died! The Hen returned and gathered up her entire brood, bringing them back into the loving care of Farmer once again. It's a fairy tale ending, but this fairy tale is *true*. How do I know it's true? Because we are the chickens, being cared for right now by the kind Farmer. We have been gathered under the Hen's wings, where we are sheltered and fed, and where the fox can never harm us again. *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

Our text today can be broken into two parts: Jesus dismisses the fox's threat and stays the course in verses 31-33, and He laments over Jerusalem and her children in verses 34-35. For those of you who have lost the ability to be moved by a fairy tale, here are seven grown-up truths that we learn from this passage.

**First, Jesus' ministry put Him at odds with the king.** Jesus wasn't killed for no reason. His ministry was a threat to King Herod and to the political stability of Jerusalem. Herod realized that there wasn't room in Jerusalem for two kings and two kingdoms. Jesus' kingdom is not *from* this world, but when it gets here, earthly kingdoms must bow to Jesus, or be destroyed.

**Second, Jesus was resolutely committed to finishing the course that God had laid out for Him, even in the face of death.** This is why Jesus is worthy of your honor and respect, of your worship and your love. Most of us, when we run a risk assessment and get back some scary results, we change course! We look for a different route even if the danger is only *potential*. Jesus knew what Herod would do, what His enemies would do. He knew that going to Jerusalem was dangerous. But He didn't waver and He didn't panic. He just kept doing what God called Him to do. He didn't change what He was doing, He didn't adjust the timetable, and He didn't alter the course He was on. He receive a credible death threat, and kept right on going. What a Savior! That's not just an impressive example of dedication; Jesus' faithfulness is what saves the world! It's what saves *you*. Thanks be to God!

**Third, in fact, death at the hands of God's enemies is what finishing the course was all about, which is why Jesus had to go to Jerusalem.** If you're a prophet, you can't get killed unless you go to Jerusalem. Dying wouldn't *keep* Jesus from finishing His course. Dying was the only way Jesus *could* finish the course.

**Fourth, Jesus compassionately longed for and labored for the restoration of those who turned away from following God.** Vs. 34 is one of the saddest and most tender laments in all of Scripture. God's attitude towards those who have wandered from the faith is one of *compassion* and *love*, and He demonstrates that by His actions – He *repeatedly* - in the face of murderous rage and stubborn contempt - *repeatedly* continues to reach out to gather Jerusalem's children under His wings. But they are not willing. Oh! How heartbreaking is that!

**Fifth, after rejecting God's efforts to gather them in, Jesus declared God's judgment on Jerusalem: her house, God's house, the temple, was forsaken.** God left the presence of His people and withdrew. Even this, though, was designed to draw His people back. To change to another biblical metaphor, God sent prophet after prophet to offer His people the food of His Word. When the rejected the prophets, God sent a famine to get their attention. *And then He sent a feast.*

**Sixth, God raised up Jesus as the new temple, the new way for God to dwell among men.** No longer a building in Jerusalem filled with Abraham's physical descendants, but a worldwide Church filled with Abraham's children by faith. This is a theological point, not one that you can read off the page, but one that becomes much unavoidable when you follow the story throughout all the gospel accounts. Quickest place to see it is when Jesus says “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again in three days.” Jesus is the temple. Ask me about that later, and we will see it clearly if God allows us to preach through a gospel.

**Seventh, Jerusalem will not see this new temple until she says, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”** Until the children of Jerusalem acknowledge who Jesus is, and until they *delight* in Him and put their *trust* in Him, God offers them *no shelter* from the fox. Jesus has become all-important to Jerusalem, because there is no safety except under His wings.

So what can we learn from Jesus' example?

When we look at how Jesus responded to the fox, we learn to **finish the course no matter what**. This is the fruit of Jesus' battle with the devil in the wilderness – He does not let concerns for His own safety change His course! But how often do we change course over something far less than our life! We change course for our comfort. We change course for money. We change course to fulfill the desires of our belly!

The little foxes in our head tell us: “Get away from here! If you keep following Jesus, you won't be able to live the life you want. Your idea of the good life will die! You'll have to lay it down for your husband, your wife, your children, your neighbors, your *enemies*! If you keep following Jesus, you'll lose your business, your reputation, your school's accreditation. You'll lose your *life*!”

When that happens in your heart, don't even give it the time of day. You tell that fox, “I will lay down my life today, I will lay down my life tomorrow, and on the third day, after I've lost my life, Jesus will help me find it.” The course that God set before Jesus is the one you are on when you follow Jesus. Which means that your course ends in death. The path of a disciple always leads to the cross. But Jesus has shown you that it is more dangerous *to turn from the course that God has laid out* than it is to *die*. So follow Him, *and go die*.

And when we look at Jesus' compassion for the chickens, we learn **how to respond when we see someone reject God**, either by denying the faith with their words, or denying it by sinful actions, and when they refuse to be gathered back under His wings. Jesus sees the children of Jerusalem walking out from God's protection, in full view of the fox, but instead of allowing justice to take its course, instead of muttering something about the survival of the fittest, instead of saying “Good riddance.”, He reaches out again and again and again. “How often” is the rhetorical statement. *Very often*.

But how often do we stop after one or two half-hearted efforts to call someone back to Christ? How often have we *ever* confronted someone in their sin, and pleaded with them to return? Bring it close to home: How often have we as parents gotten tired of correcting our little ones, the ones God has placed under our wing? How quick we are to complain and grow frustrated and angry with them, rather than reaching out once more in compassion, knowing full well that we're likely to get pecked?

Stop trying to make it to God's house with no scars on your arms! If you never get pecked, it's not because you don't have *problems*, it's because you don't have *compassion*. Compassion says "I will willingly suffer so that you don't have to. I'll let you hurt me, strike me, insult me, *kill* me, and I will *still* try to gather you under my wings." That's what our Savior did for you! And that is the course that He sets before you.

Your heart is too hard. It needs to be *broken* at the thought of one of your brothers or sisters in the jaws of the fox. *Teach* your heart to care. *Train* your soul to mourn. Hear the compassion in Jesus' voice, and then go and do what He did. Go and die.

And when your efforts are refused, when you have tried *often* to gather them in and failed, then stop. Their house is forsaken. They have rejected the food. Let the famine do its work. Paul puts it this way "I have delivered them over to Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme." Do not *hurry* to this point, but do not *fail* to get here, either. If your *loving* is rejected, God will use your *leaving*, which is why *leaving* is actually *loving*. Not as a *first step* (which is where we are tempted to put it) but as a *last resort* (which is where we are reluctant to leave it). *Loving* takes effort, and so we don't do it. *Leaving* makes us feel guilty, so we don't do that either. So learn from Jesus: loving comes first, and it tries *often*. But once love has tried often, *leaving is loving*, and *because* it is loving (at *this point*), you may not feel guilty.

Where is that point? How often is often? Jesus doesn't give you an *equation*; He gives you an *example*. There is not only one right answer. It will *depend*. You can get some guidance from the instructions in Matthew 18, and the exhortation in Philippians 4, but you won't find the magic number there either. But here is the main thing: **You must develop an attitude of compassion, and that attitude must move you to action often.** Spend more time cultivating compassion and trying to gather than worrying about the magic number.

Because here is the last thing: even when the time comes when you rest from actively trying to gather them in, *God is still at work*. If there were people who didn't listen to Jesus, there will be people who don't listen to you, and *it isn't your fault* for not being better or more faithful than Jesus! When Jesus declared the temple forsaken, He rested in the truth that God would not lose one of His saints. Not one person that God has chosen will ultimately refuse to be gathered in! It might not be *you* that gathers them in, but that's fine. The world is not yours to save.

God is still at work, and He will not rest until every last chick that He has chosen rests safely under His wings. You yourself weren't always willing, but now here you are! So as you pray for those you love, know that they may curse you now, but because Jesus died to rescue them, they will return by God's grace, saying "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*