

General Counsels to Young Men

by J.C. Ryle

J.C. Ryle's sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the evil of sin, knowing Jesus Christ, prioritizing one's soul, serving God as a young man, and making the Bible one's guide and adviser.

Scripture: Psalm 119:9, Proverbs 13:20, Proverbs 14:9, Ecclesiastes 7:20, Isaiah 64:6, Matthew 15:19, Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23, 1 Corinthians 15:33, Philippians 3:10

Topics: "The Nature of Sin", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the critical importance of understanding the nature of sin and its consequences, urging young men to recognize its true evil and the cost of atonement through Christ. He encourages them to seek a personal relationship with Jesus, as knowing Him is essential for spiritual growth and strength. Ryle warns against the dangers of poor companionship and stresses the necessity of making the Bible a guiding principle in life. He reminds young men that their souls are eternal and should be prioritized above all else, and that it is indeed possible to serve God even in youth. Ultimately, he calls for a commitment to live for the soul and to choose friends wisely, as they can greatly influence one's spiritual journey.

Transcript

3. In the third place, I wish to give some general counsels to young men.

(1) Try to get a clear view of the evil of sin.

Young men, if you did know what sin is, and what sin has done, you would not think it so strange that I exhort you as I do. You do not see it in its true colors. Your eyes are naturally blind to its guilt and danger, and therefore you cannot understand what makes me so worried about you. Oh, don't let the devil succeed in persuading you that sin is a small matter!

Think for a moment what the Bible says about sin; how it dwells naturally in the heart of every man and woman alive (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:23), how it defiles our thoughts, words, and actions, and that continually (Genesis 6:5; Matthew 15:19), how it renders us all guilty and abominable in the sight of a holy God (Isaiah 64:6; Habakkuk 1:13), how it leaves us utterly without hope of salvation, if we look to ourselves (Psalm 143:2; Romans 3:20), how its fruit in this world is shame, and its wages in the world to come--death (Romans 6:21, 23). Think calmly about all this. I tell you this day, it is just as sad to be dying of cancer and not knowing it, as it is to be a living man, and not know it.

Think what an awful change sin has worked on all our natures. Man is no longer what he was when God formed him out of the dust of the ground. He came out of God's hand upright and sinless (Ecclesiastes 7:29). In the day of his creation he was, like everything else, "very good" (Genesis 1:31). And what is man now? A fallen creature, a ruin, a being that shows the marks of corruption all over, his heart like Nebuchadnezzar, degraded and earthly, looking down and not up, his affections like a household in disorder, calling no man master, all extravagance and confusion, his understanding like a lamp flickering in the socket, impotent to guide him, not knowing good from evil, his will like a rudderless ship, tossed to and fro by every desire, and constant only in choosing any way rather than God's. What a wreck man is, compared to what he might have been! We may understand such figures being used as blindness, deafness, disease, sleep, death, when the Spirit has to give us a picture of man as he is. And man as he is, remember, was made so by sin.

Think, too, what it has cost to make atonement for sin, and to provide a pardon and forgiveness for sinners. God's own Son must come into the world, and take upon Him our nature, in order to pay the price of our redemption, and deliver us from the curse of a broken law. He who was in the beginning with the Father, and by whom all things were made, must suffer for sin the just for the unjust--must die the death of a criminal, before the way to heaven can be laid open to any soul. See the Lord Jesus Christ despised and rejected of men, scourged, mocked, and insulted--look at Him bleeding on the cross of Calvary--hear Him crying in agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Note how the sun was darkened, and the rocks shook at the sight; and then consider, young men, what must be the evil and guilt of sin.

Think, also, what sin has already done on the earth. Think how it threw Adam and Eve out of Eden, brought the flood upon the old world, caused fire to come down on Sodom and Gomorrah, drowned Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, destroyed the seven wicked nations of Canaan, scattered the twelve tribes of Israel over the face of the earth. Sin alone did all this.

Think, moreover, of all the misery and sorrow that sin has caused, and is causing, to this very day. Pain, disease, death, strifes, quarrels, divisions, envy, jealousy, malice, deceit, fraud, and cheating, violence, oppression, robbery, selfishness, unkindness, and ingratitude; all these are the fruits of sin. Sin is the parent of them all. It is sin that has so marred and spoiled the face of God's creation.

Young men, consider these things, and you will not wonder that we preach as we do. Surely, if you did think of them, you would break with sin forever. Will you play with poison? Will you sport with hell? Will you take fire in your hand? Will you harbor your deadliest enemy in your arms? Will you go on living as if it mattered nothing, whether your sins were forgiven or not, whether sin had dominion over you, or you over sin? Oh, awake to a sense of sin's sinfulness and danger! Remember the words of Solomon: "Fools mock at making amends for sin, but goodwill is found among the upright" (Proverbs 14:9).

Hear, then, the request that I make of you this day, pray that God would teach you the real evil of sin. If you would have your soul saved then get up and pray.

(2) Seek to become acquainted with our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is, indeed, the principal thing in Christianity. This is the cornerstone of Christianity. Till you know this, my warnings and advice will be useless, and your endeavors, whatever they may be, will be in vain. A watch that does not keep time is as useless as religion without Christ.

But don't let me be misunderstood. It is not the mere knowing of Christ's name that I mean, it is the knowing of His mercy, grace, and power, the knowing of Him not by the hearing of the ear, but by the experience of your hearts. I want you to know Him by faith, I want you, as Paul says, to know "the power of his resurrection; becoming like Him in His death" (Philippians 3:10). I want you to be able to say of Him, He is my peace and my strength, my life and my consolation, my Physician and my Shepherd, my Savior and my God.

Why do I make such a point of this? I do it because in Christ alone "all His [God's] fullness dwells" (Colossians 1:19), because in Him alone there is a full supply of all that we require for the needs of our souls. Of ourselves we are all poor, empty creatures, empty of righteousness and peace, empty of strength and comfort, empty of courage and patience, empty of power to stand, or go on, or make progress in this evil world. It is in Christ alone that all these things are to be found--grace, peace, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. It is just in proportion as we live upon Him, that we are strong Christians. It is only when self is nothing and Christ is all our confidence, it is only then that we shall do great exploits. Only then are we armed for the battle of life, and shall overcome. Only then are we prepared for the journey of life, and shall move forward. To live on Christ, to draw all from Christ, to do all in the strength of Christ, to be ever looking to Christ; this is the true secret of spiritual prosperity. "I can do everything," says Paul, "through Him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

Young men, I set before you Jesus Christ this day, as the treasury of your souls; and I invite you to begin by going to Him. Let this be your first step--go to Christ. Do you want to consult friends? He is the best friend: "a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24). Do you feel unworthy because of your sins? Do not fear: His blood cleanses from all sin. He says, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (Isaiah 1:18). Do you feel weak, and unable to follow Him? Do not fear: He will give you the power to become sons of God. He will give you the Holy Spirit to live in you, and seal you for His own; He will give you a new heart, and He will put a new spirit within you. Are you troubled or beset with a strange bent to evil? Do not fear: there is no evil spirit that Jesus cannot cast out, there is no disease of soul that He cannot heal. Do you feel doubts and fears? Throw them aside: "Come to Me," He says; "whoever comes to me I will never drive away." He knows very well the heart of a young man. He knows your trials and your temptations, your difficulties and your foes. In the days of His flesh He was like yours--a young man at Nazareth. He knows by experience a young man's mind. He can understand the feeling of your temptations--because He Himself suffered when He was tempted. Surely you will be without excuse if you turn away from such a Savior and Friend as this.

Hear the request I make of you this day--if you love life, seek to become acquainted with Jesus Christ.

(3) Never forget that nothing is so important as your soul.

Your soul is eternal. It will live forever. The world and all that it contains will pass away--firm, solid, beautiful, well-ordered as it is, the world will come to an end. "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (2 Peter 3:10). The works of statesmen, writers, painters, architects, are all short lived: your soul will outlive them all. The angel's voice shall proclaim one day, that "There will be no more delay!" (Revelation 10:6). Try, I beg you, to realize the fact, that your soul is the one thing worth living for. It is the part of you which ought always be considered first. No place, no employment is good for you, which injures your soul. No friend, no companion deserves your confidence, who makes light of your soul's concerns. The man who hurts you, your property, your character, only does you temporary harm. Your true enemy is the one who plots to

damage your soul.

Think for a moment why you were born into the world. Not merely to eat and drink, and indulge the desires of the flesh, not merely to dress up your body, and follow its lusts wherever they may lead you, not merely to work, and sleep, and laugh, and talk, and enjoy yourselves, and think of nothing but time. No! you were meant for something higher and better than this. You were placed here to train for eternity. Your body was only intended to be a house for your immortal spirit. It is flying in the face of God's purposes to do as many do--to make the soul a servant to the body, and not the body a servant to the soul.

Young men, God does not show favoritism or respects the honors bestowed by men. He rewards no man's heritage, or wealth, or rank, or position. He does not see with man's eyes. The poorest saint that ever died in a ghetto is nobler in His sight than the richest sinner that ever died in a palace. God does not look at riches, titles, education, beauty, or anything of the kind. There is only one thing that God does look at, and that is the immortal soul. He measures all men by one standard, one measure, one test, one criterion, and that is the state of their souls.

Do not forget this. Keep it in view, morning, noon, and night, the interests of your soul. Rise up each day desiring that your soul may excel, lie down each evening, inquiring of yourself whether your soul has really grown. Remember Zeuxis, the great painter of old. When men asked him why he labored so intensely, and took such extreme pains with every picture, his simple answer was, "I paint for eternity." Do not be ashamed to be like him. Set your immortal soul before your mind's eye, and when men ask you why you live as you do, answer them in his spirit, "I live for my soul." Believe me, the day is fast coming when the soul will be the one thing men will think of, and the only question of importance will be this, "Is my soul lost or saved?"

(4) Remember it is possible to be a young man and yet to serve God.

I fear the snares that Satan lays for you on this point. I fear that he will succeed in filling your minds with the vain notion, that to be a true Christian as a youth is impossible. I have seen many carried away by this delusion. I have heard it said, "You are requiring an impossibility in expecting so much Christianity from young people. Youth is no time for seriousness. Our desires are strong, and it was never intended that we should keep them under such strong Christian control, as you wish us to do. God meant for us to enjoy ourselves. There will be plenty of time for religion in the future." And this kind of talk is only too much encouraged by the world. The world is only too ready to wink at youthful sins. The world appears to think it a matter of course that young men must "sow their wild oats." The world seems to take it for granted that young people must be irreligious, and that it is not possible for them to follow Christ.

Young men, I will ask you this simple question--Where will you find anything of this in the Word of God? Where is the chapter or verse in the Bible which will support this talking and reasoning of the world? Doesn't the Bible speak to old and young alike, without distinction? Is not sin--sin, whether committed at the age of twenty or fifty? Will it form the slightest excuse, in the day of judgment, to say, "I know I sinned, but I was young then?" Show your common sense, I beg of you, by giving up such vain excuses. You are responsible and accountable to God from the very moment that you know right and wrong.

I know very well that there are many difficulties in a man's way. But there are always difficulties in the way of doing right. The path to heaven is always narrow, whether we be young or old. There are difficulties, but God will give you the grace to overcome them. God is no hard master. He will not, like Pharaoh, require you to make bricks without straw. He will make sure that the path He requires us to walk is never an

impossible road. He never gave commands to man which He would not give man the power to perform.

There are difficulties, but many a young man has overcome them in the past, and so can you. Moses was a young man with passions like yourself; but see what is said of him in Scripture: "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward" (Hebrews 11:24-26). Daniel was a young man when he began to serve God in Babylon. He was surrounded by temptations of every kind. He had few people with him, and many against him. Yet Daniel's life was so blameless and consistent, that even his enemies could not find any fault in him, except "it has something to do with the law of his God" (Daniel 6:5). And these are not solitary cases. There is a cloud of witnesses whom I could name. Time would not allow me, if I were to tell you of young Isaac, young Joseph, young Joshua, young Samuel, young David, young Solomon, young Abijah, young Obadiah, young Josiah, young Timothy. These were not angels, but men, with natural hearts like your own. They too had obstacles to contend with, lusts to mortify, trials to endure, hard places to travel, like any of you. But young as they were, they all found it possible to serve God. Will they not all rise in judgment and condemn you, if you persist in saying it cannot be done?

Young men, try to serve God. Resist the devil when he whispers it is impossible. Try, and the Lord God of the promises will give you strength in the trying. He loves to meet those who struggle to come to Him, and He will meet you and give you the power that you feel you need. Be like the man whom Bunyan's Pilgrim saw in the Interpreter's house, go forward boldly, saying "Write down my name." Those words of our Lord are true, though I often hear them repeated by heartless and unfeeling tongues: "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

Difficulties which seemed like mountains shall melt away like snow in spring. Obstacles which seemed like giants in the distance, will dwindle into nothing when you actually face them. The lion that blocks the way that you are traveling and causes you great fear, will prove to be chained and unable to harm you. If men believed the promises more, they would never be afraid of their assigned duties. But remember that little word I press upon you, and when Satan says, "You cannot be a Christian while you are young;" answer him, "Get behind me, Satan: by God's help I will try."

(5) Determine as long as you live to make the Bible your guide and adviser.

The Bible is God's merciful provision for sinful man's soul, the map by which he must steer his course, if he would attain eternal life. All that we need to know, in order to make us peaceful, holy, or happy, is richly contained there. If a young man wants to know how to begin his life well, let him hear what David says: "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word" (Psalm 119:9).

Young men, I charge you to make a habit of reading the Bible, and not to let the habit be broken. Do not let the laughter of friends, do not let the bad customs of the family you live in, don't let any of these things prevent your doing it. Determine that you will not only have a Bible, but also make time to read it too. Allow no man to persuade you that it is only a book for Sunday school children and old women. It is the book from which King David got wisdom and understanding. It is the book which young Timothy knew from his childhood. Never be ashamed of reading it. Do not "scorn instruction" (Proverbs 13:13).

Read it with the prayer that the Holy Spirit's grace will help you understand it. It has been said, "A man may just as soon read the Scripture without eyes, as understand the spirit of it without grace."

Read it reverently, as the Word of God, not of man, believing implicitly that what it approves is right, and what it condemns is wrong. Be very sure that every doctrine which will not stand the test of Scripture is false. This will keep you from being tossed to and fro, and carried about by the dangerous opinions of these latter days. Be very sure that every practice in your life which is contrary to Scripture, is sinful and must be given up. This will settle many a question of conscience, and cut the knot of many a doubt. Remember how differently two kings of Judah read the Word of God: Jehoiakim read it, and at once tore the page to pieces, and burned it in the fire (Jeremiah 36:23). And why? Because his heart rebelled against it, and he was resolved not to obey. Josiah read it, and at once tore his clothes, and cried mightily to the Lord (2 Chronicles 34:19). And why? Because his heart was tender and obedient. He was ready to do anything which Scripture showed him was his duty. Oh that you may follow the last of these two, and not the first!

And read it regularly. This is the only way to become "mighty in the Scriptures." A quick glance at the Bible now and then does little good. At that rate you will never become familiar with its treasures, or feel the sword of the Spirit fitted to your hand in the hour of conflict. But store up your mind with Scripture, by diligent reading, and you will soon discover its value and power. Texts will rise up in your hearts in the moment of temptation. Commands will suggest themselves in times of doubt. Promises will come across your thoughts in the time of discouragement. And thus you will experience the truth of David's words, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11); and of Solomon's words, "When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you" (Proverbs 6:22).

I dwell on these things more because this is an age of reading. There seems no end to the producing of many books, though few of them are really profitable. There seems a rage for cheap printing and publishing. Newspapers of every sort abound, and the tone of some, which have the widest circulation, speaks badly for the taste of the age. Amidst the flood of dangerous reading, I plead for my Master's book, I call upon you not to forget the book of the soul. Do not let newspapers, novels, and romances be read, while the prophets and Apostles be despised. Do not let the exciting and sensual swallow up your attention, while the edifying and the sanctifying can find no place in your mind.

Young men, give the Bible the honor due to it every day you live. Whatever you read, read that first. And beware of bad books: there are plenty in this day. Take heed what you read. I suspect there is more harm done to souls in this way than most people have an idea is possible. Value all books in proportion as they are agreeable to Scripture. Those that are nearest to it are the best, and those that are farthest from it, and most contrary to it, the worst. (6) Never make an intimate friend of anyone who is not a friend of God.

Understand me, I do not speak of acquaintances. I do not mean that you ought to have nothing to do with anyone but true Christians. To take such a line is neither possible nor desirable in this world. Christianity requires no man to be discourteous.

But I do advise you to be very careful in your choice of friends. Do not open all your heart to a man merely because he is clever, agreeable, good-natured, and kind. These things are all very well in their way, but they are not everything. Never be satisfied with the friendship of any one who will not be useful to your soul.

Believe me, the importance of this advice cannot be overrated. There is no telling the harm that is done by associating with godless companions and friends. The devil has few better helps in ruining a man's soul.

Grant him this help, and he cares little for all the armor with which you may be armed against him. Good education, early habits of morality, sermons, books, all, he knows well, will avail you little, if you will only cling to ungodly friends. You may resist many open temptations, refuse many plain snares; but once you take up a bad companion, and he is content. That awful chapter which describes Amnon's wicked conduct about Tamar, almost begins with these words, "Now Amnon had a friend, a very shrewd man" (2 Samuel 13:3).

You must remember, we are all creatures of imitation: precept may teach us, but it is example that draws us. There is that in us all, that we are always disposed to catch the ways of those with whom we live; and the more we like them, the stronger does the disposition grow. Without our being aware of it, they influence our tastes and opinions; we gradually give up what they dislike, and take up what they like, in order to become closer friends with them. And, worst of all, we catch their ways in things that are wrong far quicker than in things that are right. Health, unhappily, is not contagious, but disease is. It is far more easy to catch a chill than to impart a warmth; and to make each other's religion dwindle away, than grow and prosper.

Young men, I ask you to take these things to heart. Before you let any one become your constant companion, before you get into the habit of telling him everything, and going to him with all your troubles and all your pleasures--before you do this, just think of what I have been saying; ask yourself, "Will this be a useful friendship to me or not?"

"Bad company" does indeed "corrupt good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33). I wish that text were written in the hearts of all young men. Good friends are among our greatest blessings; they may keep us away from much evil, remind us of our course, speak an appropriate word at the right time, draw us upward, and draw us on. But a bad friend is a burden, a weight continually dragging, us down, and chaining us to earth. Keep company with an unsaved man, and it is more than probable you will in the end become like him. that is the general consequence of all such friendships. The good go down to the bad, and the bad do not come up to the good. The world's proverb is only too correct: "Clothes and company tell true tales about character." "Show me who a man lives with and I will show you what he is."

I dwell upon this point, because it has more to do with your prospects in life than first appears. If you ever marry, it is more than probable you will choose a wife from among your circle of friends or their acquaintances. If Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram had not formed a friendship with Ahab's family, he would most likely not have married Ahab's daughter. And who can estimate the importance of a right choice in marriage? It is a step which, according, to the old saying, "either makes a man or ruins him." Your happiness in both lives may depend on it. Your wife must either help your soul or harm it. She will either fan the flame of Christianity in your heart, or throw cold water upon it, and make it burn low. She will either be, wings or handcuffs, an encouragement or an hindrance to your Christianity, according to her character. He that finds a good wife does indeed "finds a good thing;" so if you have the desire to find one, be very careful how you choose your friends.

Do you ask me what kind of friends you should choose? Choose friends who will benefit your soul, friends whom you can really respect, friends whom you would like to have near you on your deathbed, friends who love the Bible, and are not afraid to speak to you about it, friends that you would not be ashamed of having at the coming of Christ, and the day of judgment. Follow the example that David sets for you: he says, "I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts" (Psalm 119:63). Remember the words of Solomon: "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm"

(Proverbs 13:20). But depend on it, bad company in this life, is the sure way to procure worse company in the life to come.

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