

Practical Religion - Self-Inquiry (Part 2)

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

(1) Let me ask, in the first place, Do we ever think about our souls at all?"

Thousands of English people, I fear, cannot answer that question satisfactorily. They never give the subject of religion any place in their thoughts. From the beginning of the year to the end they are absorbed in the pursuit of business, pleasure, politics, money, or self-indulgence of some kind or another. Death, and judgment, and eternity, and heaven, and hell, and a world to come, are never calmly looked at and considered. They live on as if they were never going to die, or rise again, or stand at the bar of God, or receive an eternal sentence! They do not openly oppose religion, for they have not sufficient reflection about it to do so; but they eat and drink, and sleep, and get money, and spend money, as if religion was a mere fiction and not a reality. They are neither Romanists, nor Socinians, nor infidels, nor High Church, nor Low Church, nor Broad Church. They are just nothing at all, and do not take the trouble to have opinions. A more senseless and unreasonable way of living cannot be conceived; but they do not pretend to reason about it. They simply never think about God, unless frightened for few minutes by sickness, death in their families, or an accident. Barring such interruptions, they appear to ignore religion altogether, and hold on to their way cool and undisturbed, as if there were nothing worth thinking of except this world.

It is hard to imagine a life more unworthy of an immortal creature than such a life as I have just described, for it reduces a man to the level of a beast. But it is literally and truly the life of multitudes in England; and as they pass away their place is taken by multitudes like them. The picture, no doubt, is horrible, distressing, and revolting; but, unhappily, it is only too true. In every large town, in every market, on every stock-exchange, in every club, you may see specimens of this class by the scores--men who think of everything under the sun except the one thing needful--the salvation of their souls. Like the Jews of old they do not "consider their ways," they do not "consider their latter end;" they do not "consider that they do evil" (Isaiah 1:3; Haggai 1:7; Deuteronomy 32:29; Ecclesiastes 5:1). Like Gallio they "care for none of these things;" they are not in their way. (Acts 18:17) If they prosper in the world, and get rich, and succeed in their line of life, they are praised, and admired by their contemporaries. Nothing succeeds in England like success! But for all this they cannot live forever. They will have to die and appear before the bar of God, and be judged; and then what will the end be? When a large class of this kind exists in our country, no reader need wonder that I ask whether he belongs to it. If you do, you ought to have a mark set on your door, as there used to be a mark on a plague-stricken house two centuries ago, with the words, "Lord have mercy on us," written on it. Look at the class I have been describing, and then look at your own soul.

(2) Let me ask, in the second place, whether we ever do anything about our souls?

There are multitudes in England who think occasionally about religion, but unhappily never get beyond thinking. After a stirring sermon,--or after a funeral,--or under the pressure of illness,--or on Sunday evening,--or when things are going on badly in their families,--or when they meet some bright example of a Christian,--or when they fall in with some striking religious book or tract,--they will at the time think a good deal, and even talk a little about religion in a vague way. But they stop short, as if thinking and talking were enough to save them. They are always meaning, and intending, and purposing, and resolving, and wishing, and telling us that they \"know\" what is right, and \"hope\" to be found right in the end, but they never attain to any action. There is no actual separation from the service of the world and sin, no real taking up the cross and following Christ, no positive doing in their Christianity. Their life is spent in playing the part of the son in our Lord\\

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