

Self-Inquiry

by J.C. Ryle

J.C. Ryle's sermon emphasizes the critical need for self-examination in one's spiritual life to ensure genuine faith and relationship with God.

Scripture: Proverbs 23:18, Ezekiel 33:31-32, Matthew 11:28, Matthew 15:8-9, Matthew 21:30, Luke 15:2, John 3:36, John 15:4-8, Acts 15:36, Hebrews 12:14

Topics: "Self-Examination", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the necessity of self-inquiry in the Christian life, urging believers to reflect on their spiritual state and relationship with God. He draws from Acts 15:36, where Paul proposes to revisit the churches to assess their faith and growth. Ryle highlights the abundance of spiritual privileges in the present age, yet warns of the dangers of mere outward profession without true heart-religion. He challenges readers to consider their thoughts, actions, and the authenticity of their faith, ultimately calling for a deeper communion with Christ and readiness for His return.

Transcript

"Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do." (Acts 15:36).

The text which heads this page contains a proposal which the Apostle Paul made to Barnabas after their first missionary journey. He proposed to revisit the Churches they had been the means of founding, and to see how the were getting on. Were their members continuing steadfast in the faith? Were they growing in grace? Were they going forward, or standing still? Were they prospering, or falling away? "Let us go again and visit our brethren in see how they do."

This was a wise and useful proposal. Let us lay it to heart, and apply it to ourselves in the nineteenth century. Let us search our ways, and find out how matters stand between ourselves and God. Let us "see how we do." I ask every reader of this volume to begin its perusal by joining me in self-inquiry. If ever self-inquiry about religion was needed, it is needed at the present day.

We live in an age of peculiar spiritual privileges. Since the world began there never was such an opportunity for a man's soul to be saved as there is in England at this time. There never were so many signs of religion in the land, so many sermons preached, so many services held in churches and chapels, so many Bibles sold, so many religious books and tracts printed, so many Societies for evangelizing

mankind supported, so much outward respect paid to Christianity. Things are done everywhere now-a-days which a hundred years ago would have been thought impossible. Bishops support the boldest and most aggressive efforts to reach the unconverted. Deans and Chapters throw open the naves of cathedrals for Sunday evening sermons! Clergy of the narrowest High Church School advocate special missions, and vie with the Evangelical brethren in proclaiming that going to church on Sunday is not enough to take a man to heaven. In short, there is a stir about religion now-a-days to which there has been nothing like since England was a nation, and which the cleverest skeptics and infidels cannot deny. If Romaine, and Venn, and Berridge, and Rowlands, and Grimshaw, and Hervey, had been told that such things would come to pass about a century after their deaths, they would have been tempted to say, with the Samaritan nobleman, "If the Lord should windows of heavens might such a thing be." (2 Kings 7:19). But the Lord has opened the floodgates of heaven. There is more taught now-a-days in England of the real Gospel, and of the way of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, in one week, than there was in a year in Romaine's time. Surely I have a right to say that we live in an age of spiritual privileges. But are we any better for it? In an age like this it is well to ask, "How do we do about our souls?"

We live in an age of special spiritual danger. Never perhaps since the world began was there such an immense amount of mere outward profession of religion as there is in the present day. A painfully large proportion of all the congregations in the land consists of unconverted people, who know nothing of heart-religion, never come to the Lord's Table, and never confess Christ in their daily lives. Myriads of those who are always running after preachers, and crowding to hear special sermons, are nothing better than empty tubs, and tinkling cymbals, without a bit of real vital Christianity at home. The parable of the sower is continually receiving most vivid and painful illustrations. The way-side hearers, the stony-ground hearers, the thorny-ground hearers abound on every side.

The life of many religious people, I fear, in this age, is nothing better than a continual course of spiritual dram-drinking. They are always morbidly craving fresh excitement; and they seem to care little what it is if they only get it. All preaching seems to be the same to them; and they appear unable to "see differences" so long as they hear what is clever, have their ears tickled, and sit in a crowd. Worst of all, there are hundreds of young unestablished believers who are so infected with the same love of excitement, that they actually think it a duty to be always seeking it. Insensibly almost to themselves, they take up a kind of hysterical, sensational, sentimental Christianity, until they are never content with the "old paths" and, like the Athenians, are always running after something new. To see a calm-minded young believer, who is not stuck up, self confident, self-conceited, and more ready to teach than learn, but content with a daily steady effort to grow up into Christ's likeness, and to do Christ's work quietly and unostentatiously, at home, is really becoming almost a rarity! Too many young professors, alas, behave like young recruits who have not spent all their bounty money. They show how little deep root they have, and how little knowledge of their hearts, by noise, forwardness, readiness to contradict and set down old Christians, and over-weaning trust in their own fancied soundness and wisdom! Well will it be for many young professors of this age if they do not end, after being tossed about for a while, and "carried to and fro by every wind of doctrine," by joining some petty, narrow-minded, censorious sect, or embracing some senseless, unreasoning crotchety heresy. Surely, in times like these there is great need for self-examination. When we look around us, we may well ask, "How do we do about our souls?"

In handling this question, I think the shortest plan will be to suggest a list of subjects for self-inquiry, and to get them in order. By so doing I shall hope to meet the case of every one into whose hands this volume may fall. I invite every reader of this paper to join me in calm, searching self-examination, for a few short

minutes. I desire to speak to myself as well as to you. I approach you not as an enemy, but as a friend. "My heart's desire and prayer to God is that you may be saved" (Romans 10:1). Bear with me if I say things which at first sight look harsh and severe. Believe me, he is your best friend who tells you the most truth.

(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's parable, to whom the father said, "'Go and work today in the vineyard:' and he answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go" (Matthew 21:30). They are like those whom Ezekiel describes, who liked his preaching, but never practiced what he preached:--"They come unto you as the people comes, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they will not do them. . . .And lo, you are unto them as a very lovely song of one that has a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear your words but they do them not." (Ezekiel 33:31- 32). In a day like this, when hearing and thinking without doing, is so common, no one can justly wonder that I press upon men the absolute need of self-examination. Once more, then, I ask my readers to consider the question of my text,--"How do we do about our souls?"

(3) Let me ask, in the third place, WHETHER WE ARE TRYING TO SATISFY OUR CONSCIENCES WITH A MERE 'FORMAL' RELIGION?

There are myriads in England at this moment who are making shipwreck on this rock. Like the Pharisees of old, they make much ado about the outward part of Christianity, while the inward and spiritual part is totally neglected. They are careful to attend all the services of their place of worship, and regular in using all its forms and ordinances. They are never absent from Communion when the Lord's Supper is administered. Sometimes they are most strict in observing Lent, and attach great importance to Saints' days. They are often keen partisans of their own Church, or sect, or congregation, and ready to contend with any one who does not agree with them. Yet all this time there is no heart in their religion. Anyone who knows them intimately can see with half an eye that their affections are set on things below, and not on things above; and that they are trying to make up for the want of inward Christianity by an excessive quantity of outward form. And this formal religion does them no real good. They are not satisfied. Beginning at the wrong end, by making the outward things first, they know nothing of inward joy and peace, and pass their days in a constant struggle, secretly conscious that there is something wrong, and yet not knowing why. Well, after all, if they do not go on from one stage of formality to another, until in despair they take a fatal plunge, and fall into Popery! When professing Christians of this kind are so painfully numerous, no one need wonder if I press upon him the paramount importance of close self-examination. If you love life, do not be content with the husk, and shell, and scaffolding of religion. Remember our Savior's words about the Jewish formalists of His day: "These people draws near with their mouth, and honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. In vain do they worship." (Matthew 15:8-9). It needs something more than going diligently to church, and receiving the Lord's Supper, to take our souls to heaven. Means of grace and forms of religion are useful in their way, and God seldom does anything for His church without them. But let us beware of making shipwreck on the very lighthouse which helps to show the channel into the harbor. Once more I ask, "How do we do about our souls?"

(4) Let me ask, in the fourth place, WHETHER WE HAVE RECEIVED THE FORGIVENESS OF OUR SINS?

Few reasonable Englishmen would think of denying that they are sinners. Many perhaps would say that they are not as bad as many, and that they have not been so very wicked, and so forth. But few, I repeat, would pretend to say that they had always lived like angels, and never done, or said, or thought a wrong thing all their days. In short, all of us must confess that we are more or less "sinners," and, as sinners, are guilty before God; and, as guilty, we must be forgiven, or be lost and condemned forever at the last day.-- Now it is the glory of the Christian religion that it provides for us the very forgiveness that we need--full,

free, perfect, eternal, and complete. It is a leading article in that well-known creed which most Englishmen learn when they are children. They are taught to say, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." This forgiveness of sins has been purchased for us by the eternal Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. He has purchased it for us by coming into the world to be our Savior, and by living, dying, and rising again, as our Substitute, in our behalf. He has bought it for us at the price of His own most precious blood, by suffering in our place on the cross, and making satisfaction for our sins. But this forgiveness, great, and full, and glorious as it is, does not become the property of every man and woman as a matter of course. It is not a privilege which every member of a Church possesses, merely because he is a Churchman. It is a thing which each individual must receive for himself by his own personal faith, lay hold on by faith, appropriate by faith, and make his own by faith; or else, so far as he is concerned, Christ will have died in vain. "He that believes on the Son has everlasting life, and he that believes not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). No terms can be imagined more simple, and more suitable to man. As good old Latimer said in speaking of the matter of justification, "It is but believe and have." It is only faith that is required; and faith is nothing more than the humble, heartfelt trust of the soul which desires to be saved. Jesus is able and willing to save; but man must come to Jesus and believe. All that believe are at once justified and forgiven: but without believing there is no forgiveness at all.

Now here is exactly the point, I am afraid, where multitudes of English people fail, and are in imminent danger of being lost forever. They know that there is no forgiveness of sin excepting in Christ Jesus. They can tell you that there is no Savior for sinners, no Redeemer, no Mediator, excepting Him who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, dead, and buried. But here they stop, and get no further! They never come to the point of actually laying hold of Christ by faith, and becoming one with Christ and Christ in them. They can say, He is a Savior, but not my Savior--a Redeemer, but not my Redeemer--a Priest, but not my Priest--an Advocate, but not my Advocate: and so they live and die unforgiven! No wonder that Martin Luther said, "Many are lost because they cannot use possessive pronouns." When this is the state of many in this day, no one need wonder that I ask men whether they have received the forgiveness of sins. An eminent Christian lady once said, in her old age,-- "The beginning of eternal life in my soul, was a conversation I had with an old gentleman who came to visit my father when I was only a little girl. He took me by the hand one day and said, 'My dear child, my life is nearly over, and you will probably live many years after I am gone. But never forget two things. One is, that there is such a thing as having our sins forgiven while we live. The other is, that there is such a thing as knowing and feeling that we are forgiven.' I thank God I have never forgotten his words."-- How is it with us? Let us not rest until we "know and feel", as the Prayer Book says, that we are forgiven. Once more let us ask, in the matter of forgiveness of sins, "How do we do?"

(5) Let me ask, in the fifth place, WHETHER WE KNOW ANYTHING BY EXPERIENCE OF CONVERSION TO GOD.

Without conversion there is no salvation. "Except you be converted, and become as little children, you shall never enter the kingdom of heaven."-- "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."--"If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His."--"If any man be in Christ he is a new creature." (Matthew 18:3, John 3:3, Romans 8:9, 2 Corinthians 5:17)

We are all by nature so weak, so worldly, so earthly-minded, so inclined to sin, that without a thorough change we cannot serve God in life, and could not enjoy Him after death. Just as ducks, as soon as they are hatched, take naturally to water, so do children, as soon as they can do anything, take to selfishness, lying, and deceit; and none pray or love God, unless they are taught. High or low, rich or poor, gentle or

simple, we all need a complete change--a change which is the special office of the Holy Spirit to give us. Call it what you please--new birth, regeneration, renewal, new creation, quickening, repentance--the thing must be had if we are to be saved: and if we have the thing it will be seen.

Sense of sin and deep hatred of it, faith in Christ and love to Him, delight in holiness and longing after more of it, love for God's people and distaste for the things of the world,--these, these are the signs and evidences which always accompany conversion. Myriads around us, it may be feared, know nothing about it. They are, in Scripture language, dead, and asleep, and blind, and unfit for the kingdom of God. Year after year, perhaps, they go on repeating the words of the creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit;" but they are utterly ignorant of His changing operations on the inward man. Sometimes they flatter themselves they are born again, because they have been baptized, and go to church, and receive the Lord's Supper; while they are totally destitute of the marks of the new birth, as described by John in his first Epistle. And all this time the words of Scripture are clear and plain,--"Except you be converted, you shall in no case enter the kingdom." (Matthew 18:3).

In times like these, no reader ought to wonder that I press the subject of conversion on men's souls. No doubt there are plenty of sham conversions in such a day of religious excitement as this. But bad coin is no proof that there is no good money: no, rather it is a sign that there is some money current which is valuable, and is worth imitation. Hypocrites and sham Christians are indirect evidence that there is such a thing as real grace among men. Let us search our own hearts then, and see how it is with ourselves. Once more let us ask, in the matter of conversion, "How do we do?"

(6) Let me ask, in the sixth place, WHETHER WE KNOW ANYTHING OF PRACTICAL CHRISTIAN HOLINESS?

It is as certain as anything in the Bible that "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). It is equally certain that it is the invariable fruit of saving faith, the real test of regeneration, the only sound evidence of indwelling grace, the certain consequence of vital union with Christ.

Holiness is not absolute perfection and freedom from all faults. Nothing of the kind! The wild words of some who talk of enjoying "unbroken communion with God for many months, are greatly to be deprecated, because they raise unscriptural expectations in the minds of young believers, and so do harm. Absolute perfection is for heaven, and not for earth, where we have a weak body, a wicked world, and a busy devil continually near our souls. Nor is real Christian holiness ever attained, or maintained, without a constant fight and struggle. The great Apostle, who said "I fight,-I labor,-I keep under my body and bring it into subjection" (1 Corinthians 9:27), would have been amazed to hear of sanctification without personal exertion, and to be told that believers only need to sit still, and everything will be done for them!

Yet, weak and imperfect as the holiness of the best saints may be, it is a real true thing, and has a character about it as unmistakable as light and salt. It is not a thing which begins and ends with noisy profession: it will be seen much more than heard. Genuine Scriptural holiness will make a man do his duty at home and by the fireside, and adorn his doctrine in the little trials of daily life. It will exhibit itself in passive graces as well as in active. It will make a man humble, kind, gentle, unselfish, good-tempered, considerate of others, loving, meek, and forgiving. It will not constrain him to go out of the world, and shut himself up in a cave, like a hermit. But it will make him do his duty in that state to which God has called him, on Christian principles, and after the pattern of Christ.

Such holiness, I know well, is not common. It is a style of practical Christianity which is painfully rare in these days. But I can find no other standard of holiness in the Word of God,- no other which comes up to the pictures drawn by our Lord and His Apostles. In an age like this no reader can wonder if I press this subject also on men's attention. Once more let us ask--In the matter of holiness, how is it with our souls? "How do we do?"

(7) Let me ask, in the seventh place, WHETHER WE KNOW ANYTHING OF ENJOYING THE MEANS OF GRACE?

When I speak of the means of grace, I have in my mind's eye five principal things: the Reading of the Bible, private prayer, public worship, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and the rest of the Lord's day.

They are means which God has graciously appointed in order to convey grace to man's heart by the Holy Spirit, or to keep up the spiritual life after it has begun. As long as the world stands, the state of a man's soul will always depend greatly on the manner and spirit in which he uses means of grace. The manner and spirit, I say deliberately and of purpose. Many English people use the means of grace regularly and formally, but know nothing of enjoying them: they attend to them as a matter of duty, but without a jot of feeling, interest, or affection. Yet even common sense might tell us that this formal, mechanical use of holy things is utterly worthless and unprofitable. Our feeling about them is just one of the many tests of the state of our souls. How can that man be thought to love God who reads about Him and His Christ as a mere matter of duty, content and satisfied if he has just moved his mark onward over so many chapters?- How can that man suppose he is ready to meet Christ who never takes any trouble to pour out his heart to Him in private as a Friend, and is satisfied with saying over a string of words every morning and evening, under the name of "prayer", scarcely thinking what he is about?- How could that man be happy in heaven forever who finds Sunday a dull, gloomy, tiresome day,-who knows nothing of hearty prayer and praise, and cares nothing whether he hears truth or error from the pulpit, or scarcely listens to the sermon?- What can be the spiritual condition of that man whose heart never "burns within him," when he receives that bread and wine which specially remind us of Christ's death on the cross, and the atonement for sin?

These inquiries are very serious and important. If means of grace had no other use, and were not mighty helps toward heaven, they would be useful in supplying a test of our real state in the sight of God. Tell me what a man does in the matter of Bible reading and praying, in the matter of Sunday, public worship, and the Lord's Supper, and I will soon tell you what he is, and on which road he is traveling. How is it with ourselves? Once more let us ask--In the matter of means of grace, "How do we do?"

(8) Let me ask, in the eighth place, WHETHER WE EVER TRY TO DO ANY GOOD IN THE WORLD?

Our Lord Jesus Christ was continually "going around doing good," while He was on earth (Acts 10:38). The Apostles, and all the disciples in Bible times, were always striving to walk in His steps. A Christian who was content to go to heaven himself and cared not what became of others, whether they lived happy and died in peace or not, would have been regarded as a kind of monster in primitive times, who did not have the Spirit of Christ. Why should we suppose for a moment that a lower standard will suffice in the present day? Why should fig trees which bear no fruit be spared in the present day, when in our Lord's time they were to be cut down as "cumberers of the ground"? (Luke 13:7). These are serious inquiries, and demand serious answers.

There is a generation of professing Christians now-a-days, who seem to know nothing of caring for their neighbors, and are completely swallowed up in the concerns of number one--that is, their own and their

family's. They eat, and drink, and sleep, and dress, and work, and earn money, and spend money, year after year; and whether others are happy or miserable, well or ill, converted or unconverted, traveling towards heaven or toward hell, appear to be questions about which they are supremely indifferent. Can this be right? Can it be reconciled with the religion of Him who spoke the parable of the good Samaritan, and bade us "go and do likewise"? (Luke 10:37). I doubt it altogether.

There is much to be done everywhere. There is not a place in England where there is not a field for work and an open door for being useful, if any one is willing to enter it. There is not a Christian in England who cannot find some good work to do for others, if he has only a heart to do it. The poorest man or woman, without a single penny to give, can always show his deep sympathy to the sick and sorrowful, and by simple good-nature and tender helpfulness can lessen the misery and increase the comfort of somebody in this troubled world. But alas, the vast majority of professing Christians, whether rich or poor, Churchmen or Dissenters, seem possessed with a devil of detestable selfishness, and do not know the luxury of doing good. They can argue by the hour about baptism, and the Lord's supper, and the forms of worship, and the union of Church and State, and such-like dry-bone questions. But all this time they seem to care nothing for their neighbors. The plain practical point, whether they love their neighbor, as the Samaritan loved the traveler in the parable, and can spare any time and trouble to do him good, is a point they never touch with one of their fingers.

In too many English parishes, both in town and country, true love seems almost dead, both in church and chapel, and wretched party-spirit and controversy are the only fruits that Christianity appears able to produce. In a day like this, no reader should wonder if I press this plain old subject on his conscience. Do we know anything of genuine Samaritan love to others? Do we ever try to do any good to any one beside our own friends and relatives, and our and our own party or cause? Are we living like disciples of Him who always "went about doing good," and commanded His disciples to take Him for their "example"? (John 13:15). If not, with what face shall we meet Him in the judgment day? In this matter also, how is it with our souls? Once more I ask, "How do we do?"

(9) Let me ask, in the ninth place, WHETHER WE KNOW ANYTHING OF LIVING THE LIFE OF HABITUAL COMMUNION WITH CHRIST?

By "communion," I mean that habit of "abiding in Christ" which our Lord speaks of, in the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel, as essential to Christian fruitfulness (John 15:4-8). Let it be distinctly understood that union with Christ is one thing, and communion is another. There can be no communion with the Lord Jesus without union first; but unhappily there may be union with the Lord Jesus, and afterwards little or no communion at all. The difference between the two things is not the difference between two distinct steps, but the higher and lower ends of an inclined plane. Union is the common privilege of all who feel their sins, and truly repent, and come to Christ by faith, and are accepted, forgiven, and justified in Him. Too many believers, it may be feared, never get beyond this stage! Partly from ignorance, partly from laziness, partly from the fear of man, partly from secret love of the world, partly from some unmortified besetting sin, they are content with a little faith, and a little hope, and a little peace, and a little measure of holiness. And they live on all their lives in this condition, doubting, weak, hesitant, and bearing fruit only "thirty-fold" to the very end of their days!

Communion with Christ is the privilege of those who are continually striving to grow in grace, and faith, and knowledge, and conformity to the mind of Christ in all things--who "forget what is behind," and "do not consider themselves yet to have taken hold of it, but "press on toward the goal to win the prize for which

God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13-14) Union is the bud, but communion is the flower: union is the baby, but communion is the strong man. He that has union with Christ does well; but he that enjoys communion with Him does far better. Both have one life, one hope, one heavenly seed in their hearts,--one Lord, one Savior, one Holy Spirit, one eternal home: but union is not as good as communion! The grand secret of communion with Christ is to be continually "living the life of faith in Him," and drawing out of Him every hour the supply that every hour requires. To me, said St. Paul, "to live is Christ."--I live: yet not I, but Christ lives in me (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:21). Communion like this is the secret of the abiding "joy and peace in believing," which eminent saints like Bradford and Rutherford notoriously possessed. None were ever more humble, or more deeply convinced of their own infirmities and corruption. They would have told you that the seventh chapter of Romans precisely described their own experience. They would have endorsed every word of the "Confession" put into the mouths of true believers, in our Prayer-book Communion Service. They would have said continually, "The remembrance of our sins is grievous to us; the burden of them is intolerable." But they were ever looking unto Jesus, and in Him they were ever able to rejoice.--Communion like this is the secret of the splendid victories which such men as these won over sin, the world, and the fear of death. They did not sit still idly, saying, "I leave it all to Christ to do for me," but, strong in the Lord, they used the Divine nature He had implanted in them, boldly and confidently, and were "more than conquerors through Him who loved them." (Romans 8:37). Like St. Paul they would have said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13).

Ignorance of this life of communion is one among many reasons why so many in this age are hankering after the Confessional, and strange views of the "real presence" in the Lord's Supper. Such errors often spring from imperfect knowledge of Christ, and obscure views of the life of faith in a risen, living, and interceding Savior. Is communion with Christ like this a common thing? Alas! It is very rare indeed! The greater part of believers seem content with the barest elementary knowledge of justification by faith, and half-a-dozen other doctrines, and go doubting, limping, halting, groaning along the way to heaven, and experience little of the sense of victory or of joy.

The Churches of these latter days are full of weak, powerless, and uninfluential believers, saved at last, "but so as by fire," but never shaking the world, and knowing nothing of an "abundant entrance." (1 Corinthians 3:15; 2 Peter 1:11). Despondency and Feeble-mind and Much-afraid, in "Pilgrim's Progress," reached the celestial city as really and truly as Valiant-for-the-truth and Greatheart. But they certainly did not reach it with the same comfort, and did not do a tenth part of the same good in the world! I fear there are many like them in these days! When things are so in the Churches, no reader can wonder that I inquire how it is with our souls. Once more I ask--In the matter of communion with Christ, "How do we do? (10) Let me ask, in the tenth and last place, whether we know anything of being ready for Christ's second coming?

That He will come again the second time is as certain as anything in the Bible. The world has not yet seen the last of Him. As surely as He went up visibly and in the body on the Mount of Olives before the eyes of His disciples, so surely will he come again in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory (Acts 1:11). He will come to raise the dead, to change the living, to reward His saints, to punish the wicked, to renew the earth, and take the curse away--to purify the world, even as He purified the temple--and to set up a kingdom where sin shall have no place, and holiness shall be the universal rule. The Creeds which we repeat and profess to believe, continually declare that Christ is coming again.

The early Christians made it a part of their religion to look for His return. Backward they looked to the cross and the atonement for sin, and rejoiced in Christ crucified. Upward they looked to Christ at the right hand of God, and rejoiced in Christ interceding. Forward they looked to the promised return of their Master, and rejoiced in the thought that they would see Him again. And we ought to do the same. What have we really got from Christ? And what do we know of Him? And what do we think of Him? Are we living as if we long to see Him again, and love His appearing?-- Readiness for that appearing is nothing more than being a real, consistent Christian. It requires no man to cease from his daily business. The farmer need not give up his farm, nor the shopkeeper his counter, nor the doctor his patients, nor the carpenter his hammer and nails, nor the bricklayer his mortar and trowel, nor the blacksmith his smithy. Each and all cannot do better than be found doing his duty, but doing it as a Christian, and with a heart packed up and ready to be gone. In the face of truth like this no reader can feel surprised if I ask, How is it with our souls in the matter of Christ's second coming? The world is growing old and running to seed. The vast majority of Christians seem like the men in the time of Noah and Lot, who were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, planting and building, up to the very day when flood and fire came. Those words of our Master are very solemn and heart-searching, "Remember Lot's wife."--"Take heed lest at any time your heart be overcharged with the cares of this life, and that day come upon you unawares." (Luke 17:32; 21:34). Once more I ask--In the matter of readiness for Christ's second coming, "How are we doing?"

I end my inquiries here. I might easily add to them; but I trust I have said enough, at the beginning of this volume, to stir up self-inquiry and self-examination in many minds. God is my witness that I have said nothing that I do not feel of paramount importance to my own soul. I only want to do good to others.

Let me now conclude all with a few words of PRACTICAL APPLICATION.

(A) IS ANY READER OF THIS PAPER ASLEEP AND UTTERLY THOUGHTLESS ABOUT CHRISTIANITY?

Oh, awake and sleep no more! Look at the churchyards and cemeteries. One by one the people around you are dropping into them, and you must lie there one day. Look forward to a world to come, and lay your hand on your heart, and say, if you dare, that you ready to die and meet God. Ah! You are like one sleeping in a boat drifting down the stream towards the falls of Niagara! "What meanest you, oh sleeper! Arise and call on your God!"--"Awake you that sheep, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light!" (Jonah 1:6; Ephesians 5:14).

(B) IS ANY READER OF THIS PAPER FEELING SELF-CONDEMNED, AND AFRAID THAT THERE IS NO HOPE FOR HIS SOUL?

Cast aside your fears, and accept the offer of our Lord Jesus Christ to sinners. Hear Him saying, "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28). "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." (John 7:37). Him that comes unto me I will in no wise cast out." (John 6:37).

Doubt not that these words are for you as well as for anyone else. Bring all your sins, and unbelief, and sense of guilt, and unfitness, and doubts, and infirmities--bring all to Christ. "This man receives sinners," and He will receive you (Luke 15:2). Do not stand still, wavering between two opinions, and waiting for a convenient season. On your feet! He's calling you. Come to Christ this very day (Mark 10:49).

(C) IS ANY READER OF THIS PAPER A PROFESSING BELIEVER IN CHRIST, BUT A BELIEVER WITHOUT MUCH JOY AND PEACE AND COMFORT?

Take advice this day. Search your own heart, and see whether the fault is not entirely your own. Very likely you are sitting at ease, content with a little faith, and a little repentance, a little grace and a little sanctification, and unconsciously shrinking back from extremes. You will never be a very happy Christian at this rate, if you live to the age of Methuselah. Change your plan, if you love life and would see good days, without delay. Come out boldly, and act decidedly. Be thorough, thorough, very through in your Christianity, and set your face fully towards the sun. Lay aside every weight, and the sin that does so easily beset you. Strive to get nearer to Christ, to abide in Him, to cleave to Him, and to sit at His feet like Mary, and drink full draughts out of the fountain of life. "These things," says St. John, "we write unto you that your joy may be full." (1 John 1:4). "If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another." (1 John 1:7). (d) Is any reader of this paper a believer oppressed with doubts and fears, on account of his feebleness, infirmity, and sense of sin?

Remember the text that says of Jesus, A bruised reed will He not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench." (Matthew 12:20). Take comfort in the thought that this text is for you. What though your faith be weak? It is better than no faith at all. The least grain of life is better than death. Perhaps you are expecting too much in this world. Earth is not heaven. You are yet in the body. Expect little from self, but much from Christ. Look more to Jesus, and less to self.

(D) FINALLY, IS ANY READER OF THIS PAPER SOMETIMES DOWNCAST BY THE TRIALS HE MEETS WITH ON THE WAY TO HEAVEN, BODILY TRIALS, FAMILY TRIALS, TRIALS OF CIRCUMSTANCES, TRIALS FROM NEIGHBORS, AND TRIALS FROM THE WORLD?

Look up to a sympathizing Savior at God's right hand, and pour out your heart before Him. He can be touched with the feelings of your trials, for He Himself suffered when He was tempted. Are you alone? So was He. Are you misrepresented and slandered? So was He. Are you forsaken by friends? So was He. Are you persecuted? So was He. Are you wearied in body and grieved in spirit? So was He. Yes! He can feel for you, and He can help as well as feel. Then learn to draw nearer to Christ. The time is short. Yet in a little while, and all will be over: we shall soon be "with the Lord". "There is an end, and your expectation shall not be cut off." (Proverbs 23:18). "You have need of patience, that, after you have done the will of God, you might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and He that shall come will come and will not tarry." (Hebrews 10:36-37).

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