

# Special Rules for Young Men

by J.C. Ryle

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*Young men, resolve to break off every known sin, shun everything that may prove an occasion of sin, and be diligent in the practice of your Christianity.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 39:9, Proverbs 15:3, Isaiah 58:13, 1 Corinthians 5:6

**Topics:** "Holiness", "Spiritual Diligence"

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## Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the importance of young men committing to a life of holiness and diligence in their Christian walk. He urges them to break off every known sin, avoid occasions of sin, and remember that God's eye is always upon them. Ryle highlights the necessity of prayer and regular church attendance as vital practices for spiritual growth. He warns against the dangers of neglecting these responsibilities, as they can lead to a life of regret and spiritual decline. Ultimately, he calls young men to dedicate their lives to God, promising that true happiness and fulfillment come from serving Him.

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## Transcript

4. In the last place, I will set down some particular rules of conduct which I strongly advise all young men to follow.

(1) For one thing, resolve at once, by God's help, to break off every known sin, however small.

Look within, each one of you. Examine your own hearts. Do you see there any habit or custom which you know is wrong in the sight of God? If you do, don't delay for a moment in attacking it. Resolve at once to lay it aside. Nothing, darkens the eyes of the mind so much, and deadens the conscience so surely, as an allowed sin. It may be a little one, but it is not any less dangerous. A small leak will sink a great ship, and a small spark will kindle a great fire, and a little allowed sin in like manner will ruin an immortal soul. Take my advice, and never spare a little sin. Israel was commanded to kill every Canaanite, both great and small. Act on the same principle, and show no mercy to little sins. Well says the book of the Song of Songs, "Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards" (Song of Songs 2:15).

You can be sure that no wicked man ever meant to be so wicked at his first beginnings. But he began with allowing himself some little sins, and that led on to something greater, and that in time produced something greater still, and thus he became the miserable being that he now is. When Hazael heard from Elisha of the horrible acts that he would one day do, he said with astonishment, "How could your servant, a mere dog, accomplish such a feat?" (2 Kings 8:13). But he allowed sin to take root in his heart, and in

the end he did them all.

Young men, resist sin in its beginnings. They may look small and insignificant, but mind what I say, resist them, make no compromise, let no sin lodge quietly and undisturbed in your heart. There is nothing finer than the point of a needle, but when it has made a hole, it draws all the thread after it. Remember the Apostle's words, "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Many a young man could tell you with sorrow and shame, that he traces the ruin of all his worldly prospects to the point I speak of--to giving way to sin in its beginnings. He began habits of deception and dishonesty in little things, and they grew on him. Step by step, he has gone on from bad to worse, till he has done things that at one time he would have thought impossible till at last he has lost his standing, lost his character, lost his peace, and almost lost his soul. He allowed a gap in the wall of his conscience, because it seemed a little one, and once allowed, that gap grew larger every day, till in time the whole wall seemed to come down.

Remember this especially in matters of truth and honesty. Be careful in even the least syllable spoken. "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Luke 16:10). Whatever the world may like to think, there are no little sins. All great buildings are made up of little parts--the first stone is as important as any other. All habits are formed by a succession of little acts, and the first little act is of mighty consequence. The axe in the fable only begged the trees to let him have one little piece of wood to make a handle, and he would never trouble them any more. He got it, and then he soon cut them all down. The devil only wants to get the wedge of a little allowed sin into your heart, and you will soon be all his own. It is a wise saying, "There is nothing small between us and God, for God is an infinite God."

There are two ways of coming down from the top of a ladder; one is to jump down, and the other is to come down by the steps: but both will lead you to the bottom. So also there are two ways of going to hell; one is to walk into it with your eyes open--few people do that; the other is to go down by the steps of little sins--and that way, I fear, is only too common. Put up with a few little sins, and you will soon want a few more. Even a heathen could say, "Who was ever content with only one sin?" If you put up with little sins then your path in life will be worse and worse every year. Jeremy Taylor very clearly described the progress of sin in a man:

First it startles him, then it becomes pleasing, then easy, then delightful, then frequent, then habitual, then a way of life! Then the man feels no guilt, then obstinate, then resolves never to repent, and then he is damned.

Young men, if you don't want to come to this, remember the rule I give you this day--resolve at once to break off every known sin.

(2) Resolve, by God's help, to shun everything which may prove an occasion of sin.

It is an excellent saying, "He that would be safe from the acts of evil, must widely avoid the occasions." There is an old fable, that the butterfly once asked the owl how she should deal with the fire, which had singed her wings; and the owl counseled her, in reply, not to even look at its smoke. It is not enough that we determine not to commit sin, we must carefully keep at a distance from all approaches to it. By this test we ought to examine the ways we spend our time--the books that we read, the friends that we visit, the part of society which we interact with. We must not be content with saying, "There is nothing wrong here;" we must go further, and say, "Is there anything here which may cause me to sin?"

This is one great reason why idleness is to be avoided. It is not that doing nothing is of itself so wicked; it is the opportunity it affords to evil and empty thoughts; it is the wide door it opens for Satan to throw in the seeds of bad things; it is this which is mainly to be feared. If David had not given opportunity to the devil, by walking on his house-top in Jerusalem with nothing to do, he probably never would have seen Bathsheba bathing, nor murdered her husband Uriah.

This, too, is one good reason why worldly entertainments are so objectionable. It may be difficult, in some instances, to show that they are, in themselves, positively unscriptural and wrong. But there is little difficulty in showing that the tendency of almost all of them is most injurious to the soul. They sow the seeds of an earthly and sensual frame of mind. They war against the life of faith. They promote an unhealthy and unnatural craving after excitement. They minister to the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. They dim the view of heaven and eternity, and give a false color to the things of time. They take away time for private prayer, and Scripture reading, and calm communion with God. The man who mingles in them is like one who gives Satan an advantage. He has a battle to fight, and he gives his enemy the help of sun, and wind, and hill. It would indeed be strange if he did not find himself continually overcome.

Young men, endeavor, as much as you can, to keep clear of everything which may prove injurious to your soul. People may say you are too conscientious, too particular, and ask where is the great harm of such and such things? But don't listen to them. It is dangerous to play tricks with sharp tools: it is far more dangerous to take liberties with your immortal soul. He that would be safe must not come near the brink of danger. He must look on his heart as a barrel of gunpowder, and be cautious not to handle one spark of temptation more than he can help.

What is the use of your praying, "Lord keep me from temptation," unless you are careful not to run into it and "keep me from evil," unless you show a desire to keep out of its way? Take an example from Joseph--Not merely did he refuse solicitation to sin from his master's wife, but he showed his prudence in refusing to even be "with her" (Genesis 39:10). Take to heart the advice of Solomon, not only to "Not set foot on the path of the wicked," but to "Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go your way" (Proverbs 4:15); "Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly!" (Proverbs 23:31). The man who took the vow of a Nazarite in Israel, not only took no wine, but he even abstained from grapes in any shape whatever. "Hate what is evil," says Paul to the Romans (Romans 12:9); not merely not to do it; "Flee the evil desires of youth," he writes to Timothy; get away from them as far as possible (2 Timothy 2:22). Oh, how needful are such cautions! Dinah just had go out among the wicked Shechemites, to see their ways, and she lost her virginity. Lot just had pitched his tent near sinful Sodom, and he lost everything but his life.

Young men, be wise with your time. Do not always be trying to see how near you can allow the enemy of souls to come, and yet escape him. Hold him at arm's length. Try to keep clear of temptation as far as possible, and this will be one great help to keep clear of sin.

(3) Resolve never to forget the eye of God.

The eye of God! Think of that. Everywhere, in every house, in every field, in every room, in every company, alone or in a crowd, the eye of God is always on you. "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good" (Proverbs 15:3), and they are eyes that read hearts as well as actions.

Endeavor, I beg you, to realize this fact. Remember that you have to deal with an all-seeing God, a God who never sleeps, a God who understands your thoughts, and with whom the night shines as the day. You may leave your father's house, and go away, like the prodigal, into a far country, and think that there is nobody to watch your conduct; but the eye and ear of God are there before you. You may deceive your parents or employers, you may tell them lies, and act one way before their faces, and another behind their backs, but you cannot deceive God. He knows you through and through. He heard what you said as you came here today. He knows what you are thinking of at this minute. He has set your most secret sins in the light of His countenance, and they will one day come out before the world to your shame, except you take heed.

How little is this really felt! How many things are done continually, which men would never do if they thought they were seen! How many matters are transacted in the rooms of imagination, which would never bear the light of day! Yes; men entertain thoughts in private, and say words in private, and do acts in private, which they would be ashamed and blush to have exposed before the world. The sound of a footstep coming has stopped many a deed of wickedness. A knock at the door has caused many an evil work to be hastily suspended, and hurriedly laid aside. But oh, what miserable folly is all this! There is an all-seeing Witness with us wherever we go. Lock the door, pull down the blind, turn out the light; it doesn't matter, it makes no difference; God is everywhere, you cannot shut Him out, or prevent His seeing. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13). Young Joseph understood this well when his employer's wife tempted him. There was no one in the house to see them, no human eye to witness against him; but Joseph was one who lived as seeing Him that is invisible: "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9)

Young men, I ask all of you to read Psalm 139. I advise all of you to learn it by heart. Make it the test of all your dealings in this world's business: say to yourself often, "Do I remember that God sees me?"

Live as in the sight of God. This is what Abraham did, he walked before Him. This is what Enoch did, he walked with Him. This is what heaven itself will be, the eternal presence of God. Do nothing that you would not like God to see. Say nothing, you would not like God to hear. Write nothing, you would not like God to read. Go no place where you would not like God to find you. Read no book of which you would not like God to say, "Show it to Me." Never spend your time in such a way that you would not like to have God say, "What are you doing?"

(4) Be diligent in the practice of your Christianity.

Be regular in going to church, whenever it is open for prayer and preaching, and it is in your power to attend. Be regular in keeping, the Lord's day holy, and determine that God's day out of the seven shall always be given to its rightful owner.

I would not want to leave any false impression on your minds. Do not go away and say I told you that going to church made up the whole of Christianity. I will tell you no such thing. I have no wish to see you grow up formalists and Pharisees. If you think the mere carrying of your body to a certain building, at certain times, on a certain day in the week, will make you a Christian, and prepare you to meet God, I tell you flatly you are miserably deceived. All services without heart-service are unprofitable and vain. They only are true worshipers who "Worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:23).

But the practices of Christianity are not to be despised because they are not saviors. Gold is not food, you cannot eat it, but you would not say it is useless, and throw it away. Your soul's eternal wellbeing most certainly does not depend on the practices of Christianity, but it is certain that without them, as a general rule, your soul will not do well. God might take all who are saved to heaven in a chariot of fire, as He did Elijah, but He does not do so. He might teach them all by visions, and dreams, and miraculous interventions, without requiring them to read or think for themselves, but He does not do so. And why not? Because He is a God that works by means, and it is His law and will that in all man's dealings with Him means shall be used. No one but a fool would think of building a house without ladders and scaffolding, and just so no wise man will despise means.

I dwell on this point, because Satan will try hard to fill your minds with arguments against the practices of Christianity. He will draw your attention to the numbers of persons who use them and are no better for the using. "See there," he will whisper, "do you not observe that those who go to church are no better than those who stay away?" But do not let this move you. It is never fair to argue against a thing because it is improperly used. It does not follow that the practices of Christianity can do no good because many do them and get no good from them. Medicine is not to be despised because many take it and do not recover their health. No man would think of giving up eating, and drinking because others choose to eat and drink improperly, and so make themselves sick. The value of the practices of Christianity, like other things, depends, in a great measure, on the manner and spirit in which we use them.

I dwell on this point too, because of the strong anxiety I feel that every young man should regularly hear the preaching of Christ's gospel. I cannot tell you how important I think this is. By God's blessing, the ministry of the gospel might be the means of converting, your soul, of leading you to a saving knowledge of Christ, of making you a child of God in action and in truth. This would indeed be cause for eternal thankfulness. This would be an event over which angels would rejoice. But even if this were not the case, there is a restraining power and influence in the ministry of the gospel, under which I earnestly desire every young man to be brought. There are thousands whom it keeps back from evil, though it has not yet turned them to God--it has made them far better members of society--though it has not yet made them true Christians. There is a certain kind of mysterious power in the faithful preaching of the gospel, which has an effect on multitudes who listen to it without receiving it into their hearts. To hear sin exposed for what it is, and holiness lifted up, to hear Christ exalted, and the words of the devil denounced--to hear the kingdom of heaven and its blessedness described, and the world and its emptiness exposed; to hear this week after week, Sunday after Sunday, is seldom without a good effect to the soul. It makes it far harder afterwards to run out and commit gross sins. It acts as a wholesome check upon a man's heart. This, I believe, is one way in which that promise of God is made good, "My word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty" (Isaiah 55:11). There is so much truth in that strong saying of Whitefield, "The gospel keeps many a person from going to jail and from being hanged, if it does not keep him from hell."

Let me name another point which is closely connected with this subject. Let nothing ever tempt you to become a Christian who does not make every effort to attend church on Sunday and make the day special to the Lord. Make up your mind to give all your Sundays to God. A spirit of disregard for this day is growing up among us with fearful rapidity, and not least among young men. Sunday vacations, Sunday visiting, Sunday excursions, to the exclusion of church attendance and honoring of the Lord, are becoming more common every year than they were, and are doing infinite harm to souls.

Young men, be jealous on this point. Whether you live in the city or in the country, take up a decided line; resolve not to miss church on Sunday and the fellowship of God's people. Do not let the plausible

argument of "needing to sleep-in to rest your body," do not let not the example of all those around you, do not let the invitation of companions pull you away from fellowship and worship; let none of these things move you to depart from this settled rule, that Sunday's are for God's honor and for fellowship with His people.

Once you don't consider Sundays important or anything special in your Christian life, then in the end you will give up caring for your soul. The steps which lead to this conclusion are easy and common. Begin with not honoring the Lord's Day, and you will soon not honor God's people; cease to honor God's book; and in time you will give God no honor at all. Let a man lay the foundation of having no respect for God's worship or the fellowship of the saints, and I am never surprised if he finishes with no God. It is a remarkable saying of Judge Hale, "Of all the persons who were convicted of capital crimes while he was on the bench, he found only a few who would not confess, on inquiry, that they began their career of wickedness by a neglect of the church and God's people."

Young men, you may have friends who forget the honor of the Lord's day; but resolve, by God's help, that you will always remember to keep it special. Honor it by a regular attendance at some place where the gospel is preached. Settle down under a faithful ministry, and once settled, let your place in church never be empty. Believe me, you will find a special blessing following you: "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD'S holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob" (Isaiah 58:13-14). And one thing is very certain, your feelings about Sunday and the fellowship will always be a test and criterion of your fitness for heaven. Fellowship and worship are a foretaste and a fragment of heaven. The man who finds them a burden and not a privilege, may be sure that his heart stands in need of a mighty change.

(5) Resolve that wherever you are, you will pray.

Prayer is the life-breath of a man's soul. Without it, we may have a name to live, and be counted Christians; but we are dead in the sight of God. The feeling that we must cry to God for mercy and peace is a mark of salvation; and the habit of spreading before Him our soul's needs is an evidence that we have the spirit of adoption. And prayer is the appointed way to obtain the relief of our spiritual necessities. It opens the treasury, and sets the fountain flowing. If we don't have, it is because we don't ask.

Prayer is the way to procure the outpouring of the Spirit upon our hearts. Jesus has promised the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. He is ready to come down with all His precious gifts, renewing, sanctifying, purifying, strengthening, cheering, encouraging, enlightening, teaching, directing, guiding, into all truth. But then He waits to be asked.

And here it is, I say it with sorrow, here it is that men fall short so miserably. Few indeed are to be found who pray: there are many who go down on their knees, and say a form perhaps, but few who pray; few who cry out to God, few who call on the Lord, few who seek as if they wanted to find, few who knock as if they hungered and thirsted, few who wrestle, few who strive with God earnestly for an answer, few who give Him no rest, few who continue in prayer, few who pray always without ceasing and do not grow weak. Yes: few pray! It is just one of the things assumed as a matter of course, but seldom practiced; a thing which is everybody's business, but in fact hardly anybody performs.

Young men, believe me, if your soul is to be saved, you must pray. God has no speechless children. If you are to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil, you must pray: it is in vain to look for strength in the hour of trial, if it has not been sought for. You may be thrown in with those who never do it, you may have to sleep in the same room with someone who never asks anything of God, still, mark my words, you must pray.

I can believe that you find it difficult to do, difficulties about opportunities to pray, and times to pray, and places to pray. I dare not lay down too strict rules on such points as these. I leave them to your own conscience. You must be guided by circumstances. Our Lord Jesus Christ prayed on a mountain; Isaac prayed in the fields; Hezekiah turned his face to the wall as he lay upon his bed; Daniel prayed by the riverside; Peter, the Apostle, on the housetop. I have heard of young men praying in stables and haylofts. All that I contend for is this, you must know what it is to "go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen" (Matthew 6:6). There must be stated times when you must speak to God face to face, you must every day have your times for prayer--You must pray.

Without this, all my advice and counsel is useless. This is that piece of spiritual armor which Paul names last in his list, in Ephesians 6, but it is in truth that is first in value and importance. This is that meat which you must eat daily, if you would travel safely through the wilderness of this life. It is only in the strength of this that you will get onward towards the mountain of God. I have heard it said that some people who grind metal sometimes wear a magnetic mouthpiece at their work, which catches all the fine metal dust that flies around them, prevents it from entering their lungs, and so saves their lives. Prayer is the mouthpiece that you must wear continually, or else you will never work uninjured by the unhealthy atmosphere of this sinful world. You must pray.

Young men, be sure no time is so well spent as that which a man spends on his knees. Make time for this, whatever your situation may be. Think of David, King of Israel: what does he say? "Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice" (Psalm 55:17). Think of Daniel. He had all the business of a kingdom on his hands; yet he prayed three times a day. See there the secret of his safety in wicked Babylon. Think of Solomon. He begins his reign with prayer for help and assistance, and hence his wonderful prosperity. Think of Nehemiah. He could find time to pray to the God of heaven, even when standing in the presence of his master, Artaxerxes. Think of the example these good men have left you, and go and do likewise.

Oh that the Lord may give you all the spirit of grace and supplication! "Have you not just called to me: 'My Father, my friend from my youth'" (Jeremiah 3:4). Gladly would I consent to the fact that all of this message should be forgotten, if only this doctrine of the importance of prayer might be impressed on your hearts.

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## V. Conclusion

And now I hurry towards a conclusion. I have said things that many perhaps will not like, and not receive; but I appeal to your consciences, Are they not true?

Young men, you all have consciences. Corrupt and ruined by the fall as we are, each of us has a conscience. In a corner of each heart there sits a witness for God, a witness who condemns when we do wrong, and approves when we do right. To that witness I make my appeal this day, are not the things that I have been saying true?

Go then, young men, and resolve this day to remember your Creator in the days of your youth. Before the day of grace is past, before your conscience has become hardened by age, and deadened by repeated trampling under foot, while you have strength, and time, and opportunities, go and join yourself to the Lord in an everlasting covenant not to be forgotten. The Spirit will not always strive. The voice of conscience will become feebler and fainter every year you continue to resist it. The Athenians said to Paul, "We want to hear you again on this subject" but they had heard him for the last time (Acts 17:32). Make haste, and don't delay. Linger and hesitate no more.

Think of the unspeakable comfort you will give to parents, relatives, and friends, if you take my counsel. They have expended time, money, and health to raise you, and make you what you are. Surely they deserve some consideration. Who can know the joy and gladness which young people have in their power to give? Who can tell the anxiety and sorrow that sons like Esau, and Hophni, and Phinehas, and Absalom may cause? Truly indeed does Solomon say, "A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother" (Proverbs 10:1). Oh, consider these things, and give God your heart! Let it not be said of you at last, as it is of many, that your "youth was a disorder, your manhood a struggle, and your old age a regret."

Think of the good you might be doing for the world. Almost all the eminent saints of God sought the Lord early. Moses, Samuel, David, Daniel, all served God from their youth. God seems to delight in putting special honor upon young servants; and think of what we could expect, if young men in our own day would consecrate the springtime of their lives to God? Workers are wanted now in almost every great and good cause, and cannot be found. Technology of every kind for spreading truth exists, but there are not people to make it work.

Money is more easily obtained for doing good than men. Ministers are wanted for new churches, missionaries are wanted for new fields, teachers are wanted for Sunday School, many a good cause is standing still merely for want of workers. The supply of godly, faithful, trustworthy men, for posts like those I have named, is far below the demand.

Young men of the present day, you are wanted for God. This is an age of activity. We are shaking off some of our past selfishness. Men no longer sleep the sleep of apathy and indifference about others, as their forefathers did. They are beginning to be ashamed of thinking like Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" A wide field of usefulness is open before you, if you are only willing to enter into it. The harvest is great, and the workers are few. Be zealous of good works. Come, come to the aid of the Lord against the wickedness of this age.

This is, in some sort, to be like God, not only good, but doing good (Psalm 119:68). This is the way to follow the steps of your Lord and Savior: "He went around doing good" (Acts 10:38).

And who can doubt that this is the path which makes an immortal soul beautiful? Who would not rather leave this world like Josiah, grieved by all, than depart like Jehoram, "to no one's regret?" (2 Chronicles 21:20). Is it better to be idle, frivolous, to live for your body, your selfishness, your lusts, and your pride, or to spend and be spent in the glorious cause of usefulness to your fellow men--to be a blessing to your country and the world, to be the friend of the prisoner and the captive, to be the spiritual father of hundreds of immortal souls in heathen lands, to be a burning and a shining light, an epistle of Christ, known and read of all men, the inspiration of every Christian heart that comes across your path? Oh, who can doubt? Who can for one moment doubt?

Young men, consider your responsibilities. Think of the privilege and luxury of doing good. Resolve this day to be useful. Give your hearts at once to Christ.

Think, lastly, of the happiness that will come to your own soul, if you serve God, happiness as you travel through life, and happiness in the end, when the journey is over. Believe me, whatever vain notions you may have heard, believe me, there is a reward for the righteous even in this world. Godliness has indeed the promise of this life, as well as of that which is to come. There is a solid peace in feeling that God is your friend. There is a real satisfaction in knowing that however your unworthiness, you are complete in Christ, that you have an enduring portion, that you have chosen that good part which shall not be taken from you.

The backslider in heart may well be content with his own ways, but "the good man [will be] rewarded for his" (Proverbs 14:14). The path of the worldly man grows darker and darker every year that he lives; the path of the Christian is like a shining light, brighter and brighter to the very end. His sun is just rising when the sun of the worldly is setting forever; his best things are all beginning to blossom and bloom forever, when those of the worldly are all slipping out of his hands, and passing away.

Young men, these things are true. Listen to the word of exhortation. Be persuaded. Take up the cross. Follow Christ. Yield yourselves to God.

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