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for Holiness*

J. C. RYLE

*Foreword by
Andrew Atherstone*

Fighting for
Holiness

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FIGHTING
FOR
HOLINESS

J. C. RYLE

 **CROSSWAY**[®]

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Fighting for Holiness

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jordan Singer

Cover image: “Blackthorn” by William Morris. (Bridgeman Images)

First printing 2022

Printed in China

Scripture quotations in the text are from sources not identified by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-8008-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-8011-6

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-8009-3

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-8010-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ryle, J. C. (John Charles), 1816–1900, author.

Title: Fighting for holiness / J.C. Ryle.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2022. | Series: Crossway short classics | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021020257 (print) | LCCN 2021020258 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433580086 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433580093 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433580109 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433580116 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Holiness. | Christian life.

Classification: LCC BT767 .R9495 2022 (print) | LCC BT767 (ebook) | DDC 234/.8—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021020257>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021020258>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

RRDS 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22
14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Foreword

THIS LITTLE TRACT was originally published under the title *Are You Fighting?* John Ryle, the most popular evangelical tract writer of his generation, knew how to grab his readers' attention. His exhortations are direct, vigorous, personal, and practical. Many of his tracts carry similar pithy titles, designed to startle us and wake us up: *Are You Forgiven?*, *Are You Happy?*, *Are You Holy?*, *Do You Believe?*, *Are You Free?*, *Do You Love Christ?*, *Repent or Perish!*

Are You Fighting? was written in December 1870, when armed conflict between Prussia and France was engulfing continental Europe. French forces

were starved into submission in the Siege of Metz and routed at the Battle of Sedan. Napoleon III, *Empereur des Français*, was captured and deposed, and German troops encircled Paris. The British government maintained a studied neutrality, but the newspapers were filled every day with dramatic reports from across the English Channel. It presaged the Great War of the next generation. As Ryle wrote in his tract,

We meet each other at a critical period of the world's history. Men's minds are full of "wars and rumours of wars". Men's hearts are full of fear while they look at the things which seem coming on the earth. On every side the horizon looks black and gloomy. Who can tell when the storm will burst?¹

1 J. C. Ryle, *Are You Fighting? A Question for 1871. Being Thoughts on 1 Timothy vi. 12* (London: William Hunt, 1871), 4.

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But Ryle saw the opportunity to drive home a spiritual lesson. The Franco-Prussian War was the preacher's hook to lay hold of an audience and challenge them about fighting the Christian war. His tract was designed to be highly engaging, and easy to give away to friends and neighbors, sold in bulk at two shillings per dozen.

Ryle's writing has an urgent, evangelistic heart-beat. He pleads with us to take seriously the pursuit of holiness. In an age when the character and conduct of Christians are often indistinguishable from the secular world—as endemic today as in the 1870s—it is an appeal we desperately need to hear. Worldliness has crept into the church. Many professing Christians, in Ryle's words, succumb to a life of “religious ease” with no desire to wrestle in prayer or fight against temptation. Too often, our spiritual lives are marked by “apathy, stagnation, deadness, and indifference.” This tract

is a call to arms. Ryle exhorts us to take action: “Shake off your past carelessness and unbelief. Come out from the ways of a thoughtless, un-reasoning world. Take up the cross, and become a good soldier of Christ.”

Ryle’s primary target is the half-hearted Christian, who has no ambition to live differently from the rest of the world, or to be more holy this year than last. But he also has a second target in mind: the passivist Christian (or, in the context of spiritual warfare, the “pacifist” Christian) who has laid down their arms and foolishly thinks that godliness is automatic. In the 1870s, a new group of teachers rose to prominence in the Victorian Church, promoting holiness without effort. They advocated the “higher Christian life,” which emphasized resting and abiding in place of struggling and striving. One of the most popular holiness manuals was *The Christian’s Secret of a*

Happy Life (1875) by Pennsylvanian author Hannah Whitall Smith, who taught that it was as silly to urge a Christian to grow in holiness as to urge a child to grow in height. Conscious effort was unnecessary and even counterproductive. Christians should simply yield themselves to God, without fighting against sin, and let the Holy Spirit do the sanctifying work single-handedly. Smith and her husband toured Britain, teaching these passivist doctrines, which took root at Bible conventions like Keswick in the Lake District. These ideas gave birth to mottos like “Let go and let God” and “Don’t wrestle, just nestle.”

Ryle argued that this new approach to holiness was ignoring half the Bible. The New Testament epistles, for example, often urge us to strive for practical holiness by holding our tongues, keeping our tempers, watching our steps, guarding our relationships, resisting

the devil. The “higher life” advocates claimed that the active struggles against sin pictured in Romans 7 are those of a law-bound moralist, not a Spirit-filled Christian, but Ryle retorted that “the greatest divines in every age since the Reformation have steadily and continuously maintained, that it is a literal, perfect, accurate, correct photograph of the experience of every true saint of God.”² Sanctity requires daily struggle. No one becomes holy by accident. Ryle therefore collected a few of his tracts into a single volume, *Holiness* (1877), his most famous publication. He retooled *Are You Fighting?* for this new purpose, adding some extra flourishes to drive his point home. Scattered throughout this new edition are direct rebuttals of the “higher life” teachers:

2 J. C. Ryle in *The Record* newspaper, May 28, 1875.

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He that would understand the nature of true holiness must know that the Christian is a “man of war.” If we would be holy, we must fight.

He that pretends to condemn “fighting” and teaches that we ought to sit still and “yield ourselves to God” appears to me to misunderstand his Bible, and to make a great mistake.

Where there is grace, there will be conflict. The believer is a soldier. There is no holiness without a warfare. Saved souls will always be found to have fought a fight.

May we never forget that without fighting there can be no holiness while we live, and no crown of glory when we die!

The worldly Christian and the passivist Christian make the same mistake. They both fail to

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take seriously the repeated commands of Scripture to keep fighting for personal holiness, under the banner of Christ, with the Holy Spirit as our strong ally. Ryle's invigorating tract is a deep challenge and a warm-hearted encouragement to pursue godliness with all our energies, to the very end of our days.

Andrew Atherstone
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Series Preface

JOHN PIPER ONCE WROTE that books do not change people, but paragraphs do. This pithy statement gets close to the idea at the heart of the Crossway Short Classics series: some of the greatest and most powerful Christian messages are also some of the shortest and most accessible. The broad stream of confessional Christianity contains an astonishing wealth of timeless sermons, essays, lectures, and other short pieces of writing. These pieces have challenged, inspired, and borne fruit in the lives of millions of believers across church history and around the globe.

Series Preface

The Crossway Short Classics series seeks to serve two purposes. First, it aims to beautifully preserve these short historic pieces of writing through new high-quality physical editions. Second, it aims to transmit them to a new generation of readers, especially readers who may not be inclined or able to access a larger volume. Short-form content is especially valuable today, as the challenge of focusing in a distracting, constantly moving world becomes more intense. The volumes in the Short Classics series present incisive, gospel-centered grace and truth through a concise, memorable medium. By connecting readers with these accessible works, the Short Classics series hopes to introduce Christians to those great heroes of the faith who wrote them, providing readers with representative works that both nourish the soul and inspire further study.

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Readers should note that the spelling and punctuation of these works have been lightly updated where applicable. Scripture references and other citations have also been added where appropriate. Language that reflects a work's origin as a sermon or public address has been retained. Our goal is to preserve as much as possible the authentic text of these classic works.

Our prayer is that the Holy Spirit will use these short works to arrest your attention, preach the gospel to your soul, and motivate you to continue exploring the treasure chest of church history, to the praise and glory of God in Christ.

Biography of J. C. Ryle

JOHN CHARLES RYLE (1816–1900) was born in England and educated at Oxford University. At one point, he aspired to a career in politics but was unable to pursue this due to financial difficulties. Instead, Ryle pursued a career in ministry in the Church of England. His plain, passionate style and emphasis on Scripture earned him a reputation as a dynamic minister.

Ryle authored many books and tracts, but his most popular and famous work is probably *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*, published in 1877. Ryle was concerned that many Christians in his day had grown indifferent toward practical matters

of faithfulness and purity. In a Puritan-like style, Ryle challenged his readers by reminding them of the great importance the Bible places on personal holiness. “The immense importance,” Ryle wrote, “of ‘adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour’ and making it lovely and beautiful by our daily habits and tempers has been far too much overlooked.”¹

Ryle expressed this emphasis on the transformative effects of the gospel with books such as *Thoughts for Young Men* and *Practical Religion*. Throughout his ministry, Ryle sought to bring together both belief and behavior by showing how the same Christ whom believers confess with their mouths also creates a new heart in everyone who is born again. In 1880, Ryle was appointed the first bishop of Liverpool, a position he held until his retirement shortly before his death in 1900.

1 J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1979), xvii.

FIGHTING
FOR
HOLINESS

Fight the good fight of faith.

1 Timothy 6:12



IT IS A CURIOUS FACT that there is no subject about which most people feel such deep interest as “fighting.” Young men and maidens, old men and little children, high and low, rich and poor, learned and unlearned all feel a deep interest in wars, battles, and fighting.

This is a simple fact, whatever way we may try to explain it. We should call that Englishman a dull fellow who cared nothing about the story of Waterloo or Inkerman or Balaclava or Lucknow. We should think that heart cold and stupid that was not moved and thrilled by the struggles at Sedan and Strasburg and Metz and Paris during the war between France and Germany.

But there is another warfare of far greater importance than any war that was ever waged by man. It is a warfare that concerns not two or three nations only but every Christian man and woman born into the world. The warfare I speak of is the spiritual warfare. It is the fight that everyone who would be saved must fight about his soul.

This warfare, I am aware, is a thing of which many know nothing. Talk to them about it, and they are ready to set you down as a madman, an enthusiast, or a fool. And yet it is as real and true as any war the world has ever seen. It has its hand-to-hand conflicts and its wounds. It has its watchings and fatigues. It has its sieges and assaults. It has its victories and its defeats. Above all, it has consequences that are awful, tremendous, and most peculiar. In earthly warfare, the consequences to nations are often temporary and remediable. In the spiritual warfare, it is very dif-

ferent. Of that warfare, the consequences, when the fight is over, are unchangeable and eternal. It is of this warfare that St. Paul spoke to Timothy when he wrote those burning words, “Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life.”

It is of this warfare that I propose to speak in this paper. I hold the subject to be closely connected with that of sanctification and holiness. He that would understand the nature of true holiness must know that the Christian is “a man of war.” If we would be holy, we must fight.

I

The first thing I have to say is this: true Christianity is a fight.

True Christianity! Let us mind that word “true.” There is a vast quantity of religion current in the world that is not true, genuine

Christianity. It passes muster; it satisfies sleepy consciences; but it is not good money. It is not the real, that which was called Christianity eighteen hundred years ago. There are thousands of men and women who go to churches and chapels every Sunday, and call themselves Christians. Their names are in the baptismal register. They are reckoned Christians while they live. They are married with a Christian marriage service. They mean to be buried as Christians when they die. But you never see any “fight” about their religion! Of spiritual strife and exertion and conflict and self-denial and watching and warring, they know literally nothing at all. Such Christianity may satisfy man, and those who say anything against it may be thought very hard and uncharitable, but it certainly is not the Christianity of the Bible. It is not the religion that the Lord Jesus founded and his apostles preached. It is not

the religion that produces real holiness. True Christianity is “a fight.”

The true Christian is called to be a soldier, and must behave as such from the day of his conversion to the day of his death. He is not meant to live a life of religious ease, indolence, and security. He must never imagine for a moment that he can sleep and doze along the way to heaven, like one traveling in an easy carriage. If he takes his standard of Christianity from the children of this world, he may be content with such notions, but he will find no countenance for them in the word of God. If the Bible is the rule of his faith and practice, he will find his course laid down very plainly in this matter. He must “fight.”

With whom is the Christian soldier meant to fight? Not with other Christians. Wretched indeed is that man’s idea of religion who fancies that it consists in perpetual controversy! He who

is never satisfied unless he is engaged in some strife between church and church, chapel and chapel, sect and sect, faction and faction, party and party knows nothing yet as he ought to know. No doubt, it may be absolutely needful sometimes to appeal to law courts, in order to ascertain the right interpretation of a church's articles and rubrics and formularies. But, as a general rule, the cause of sin is never so much helped as when Christians waste their strength in quarreling with one another and spend their time in petty squabbles.

No, indeed! The principal fight of the Christian is with the world, the flesh, and the devil. These are his never-dying foes. These are the three chief enemies against whom he must wage war. Unless he gets the victory over these three, all other victories are useless and vain. If he had a nature like an angel, and were not a fallen creature,

the warfare would not be so essential. But with a corrupt heart, a busy devil, and an ensnaring world, he must either “fight” or be lost.

He must fight *the flesh*. Even after conversion, he carries within him a nature prone to evil, and a heart weak and unstable as water. That heart will never be free from imperfection in this world, and it is a miserable delusion to expect it. To keep that heart from going astray, the Lord Jesus bids us “watch and pray.” The spirit may be ready, but the flesh is weak. There is need of a daily struggle and a daily wrestling in prayer. “I keep under my body,” cries St. Paul, “and bring it into subjection.” “I see a law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity.” “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” “They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and

lusts.” “Mortify your members which are upon the earth.” (Mark 14:38; 1 Cor. 9:27; Rom. 7:23, 24; Gal. 5:24; Col. 3:5)

He must fight *the world*. The subtle influence of that mighty enemy must be daily resisted, and without a daily battle can never be overcome. The love of the world’s good things, the fear of the world’s laughter or blame, the secret desire to keep in with the world, the secret wish to do as others in the world do, and not to run into extremes—all these are spiritual foes that beset the Christian continually on his way to heaven and must be conquered. “The friendship of the world is enmity with God: whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” “If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” “The world is crucified to me, and I unto the world.” “Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world.” “Be not conformed to

this world.” (James 4:4; 1 John 2:15; Gal. 6:14; 1 John 5:4; Rom. 12:2)

He must fight *the devil*. That old enemy of mankind is not dead. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, he has been “going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it,” and striving to compass one great end: the ruin of man’s soul. Never slumbering and never sleeping, he is always “going about as a lion seeking whom he may devour.” An unseen enemy, he is always near us, about our path and about our bed, and spying out all our ways. A “murderer and a liar” from the beginning, he labors night and day to cast us down to hell. Sometimes by leading into superstition, sometimes by suggesting infidelity, sometimes by one kind of tactics, and sometimes by another, he is always carrying on a campaign against our souls. “Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.” This

mighty adversary must be daily resisted if we wish to be saved. But “this kind goeth not out” but by watching and praying, and fighting, and putting on the whole armor of God. The strong man armed will never be kept out of our hearts without a daily battle. (Job 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:8; John 8:44; Luke 22:31; Eph. 6:11)

Some men may think these statements too strong. You fancy that I am going too far and laying on the colors too thickly. You are secretly saying to yourself that men and women in England may surely get to heaven without all this trouble and warfare and fighting. Listen to me for a few minutes, and I will show you that I have something to say on God’s behalf.

Remember the maxim of the wisest general that ever lived in England: “In time of war it is the worst mistake to underrate your enemy, and try to make a little war.” This Christian warfare

is no light matter. Give me your attention and consider what I say.

What saith the Scripture? “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life.” “Endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the ruler of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand.” “Strive to enter in at the strait gate.” “Labour for the meat that endureth unto everlasting life.” “Think not that I came to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace but a sword.” “He that hath no sword let him sell his garment and buy one.” “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith:

quit you like men, be strong.” “War a good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.” (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:3; Eph. 6:11–13; Luke 13:24; John 6:27; Matt. 10:34; Luke 22:36; 1 Cor. 16:13; 1 Tim. 1:18, 19)

Words such as these appear to me clear, plain, and unmistakable. They all teach one and the same great lesson, if we are willing to receive it. That lesson is that true Christianity is a struggle, a fight, and a warfare. He that pretends to condemn “fighting” and teaches that we ought to sit still and “yield ourselves to God” appears to me to misunderstand his Bible, and to make a great mistake.

What says the baptismal service of the Church of England? No doubt, that service is uninspired, and, like every uninspired composition, it has its defects; but to the millions of people all over the globe, who profess and call themselves English churchmen, its voice ought to speak with