

INTRODUCTION

by Bishop Ryle

For a number of years (i.e. in Ryle's lifetime - Ed.) I have had the conviction that practical holiness and complete self-consecration to God are being neglected. Godliness has been smothered by worldliness, personal devotion to Christ hardly exists and standards of Christian living have been lowered. The importance of making *the teaching about God our Saviour attractive* (Titus 2:10) has been forgotten.

Professing good evangelical doctrine is useless unless it is accompanied by a holy life. The insincerity of claiming to be a Bible-believing Christian without holy living is soon recognised as a sham which brings contempt for our religion.

It is of utmost importance, however, that the whole subject should be understood in the light of Bible teaching. My intention in this book is to try and explain what the Scripture actually teaches on the subject. And since there are several wrong ideas on the subject being taught by some, I begin by alerting you to those errors.

1. Is it wise to teach, as some do, that the holiness of believers comes by faith only, and not at all by the believer's personal effort?

No well-taught Christian will ever deny that faith in Christ is the beginning of all holiness. Until we believe in him we have no holiness at all. But surely the Scripture teaches us that the believer needs personal exertion in this matter, as well as faith. The same Apostle who wrote, *The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God* (Galatians 2:20) also wrote, *I beat my body and make it my slave* (1 Corinthians 9:27). In other places we read, *Let us purify ourselves ... Let us make every effort... Let us run with perseverance* (2 Corinthians 7:1; Hebrews 4:11; 12:1).

There is a difference between how faith justifies¹ us and how it sanctifies² us, according to Scripture teaching. Justifying faith is a grace which simply trusts, rests, leans on Christ (Romans 4:5). All who simply believe are justified. Sanctifying faith is a grace which, like the mainspring of a clock, moves the believer toward holiness; *the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love* (Galatians 5:6). Nowhere does the New Testament speak of 'holiness by faith'. Whereas we are told that we are justified by faith without the deeds of the law, nowhere are we told that we are sanctified without the deeds of the law. On the contrary, we learn that, *faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead* (James 2:17).

2. Is it wise to make so little, as some do, of the many practical exhortations to holiness found in the Sermon on the Mount and in the latter part of Paul's epistles?

No well-taught believer will dispute the need of a daily walk with God, of a regular habit of coming to the Lord Jesus Christ in prayer and meditation. But the New Testament is not content to teach us in such general terms. Instead, we find it speaks of many details and particular things.

The use of our tongues, of our tempers, our natural inclinations, our conduct as parents or

children, masters or servants, husbands, wives, rulers, subjects, our demeanour in sickness or in health, in riches or in poverty — all these are matters about which the Bible speaks in detail. Holiness is much more than tears and sighs, bodily excitement, a quickened pulse, passionate attachment to some preacher or religious group. It is being *conformed to the likeness of [God's] Son* (Romans 8:29); it is something capable of being seen by others, in the detail of our character, habits and daily behaviour.

3. Is it wise to teach that it is possible for a believer to reach a standard of complete holiness in this life?

There is no doubt that believers are constantly urged, in Scripture, to *aim for perfection* (2 Corinthians 13:11). But I have yet to find a single passage in the Bible which teaches that a complete and entire freedom from sin is possible, or has ever been reached, in this life by any believer. A comparative perfection is possible; but as to a literal and absolute perfection, none of the greatest saints of God in any age have ever claimed it. And the great saints of Bible history — David, Paul, John — had no hesitation in declaring that they were conscious of weakness and sin in their own hearts.

I must think that those who claim sinless perfection in this life know very little of the nature of sin, or of the holiness of God. I protest against such unbiblical teaching, for it is a dangerous delusion. It disgusts discerning people and alienates them from religion for they see the notion is false. It depresses some of the best of God's children, who feel far from reaching such perfection and it makes weak believers feel proud, when they fancy they are something when they are not.

4. Is it wise to assert so positively as some do that the seventh chapter of Romans describes, not the experience of a saint, but the experience of an unregenerate person?

This is a point which has been in dispute ever since the time of Paul. But it must be said that all the Reformers, the Puritans, and many other students of Scripture all agree that Paul here describes the experience of a Christian believer. (Ryle indicates a list of names, including Haldane and Owen, who defend the position that Paul is writing of his own present experience). To disregard the weight of the opinions of such an array of Reformers and Puritans is surely unwise?

5. Is it wise to understand the expression 'Christ in us' in such a way that it gives the expression an unbiblical importance?

Undoubtedly the expression is scriptural; (Romans 8:10; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 3:17; Colossians 3:11). And some have actually suggested that we are to understand this truth as meaning that the believer is not responsible for what he or she does, because it is Christ in them who does everything! That cannot be right.

To make this claim is to ignore the fact that the presence of Christ in the believer is by the presence of the Holy Spirit in them. Christ, as our risen High Priest, is specially at God's right hand interceding for his people until he comes again. It is the Holy Spirit who is the *Counsellor to be with you for ever* (John 14:16) to carry out his special work of urging us on in sanctification. Never forget that a distorted truth, as some have distorted this truth of 'Christ in us', is the starting point of dangerous heresies.

6. Is it wise to separate between conversion and consecration, or 'the higher life', as some have done?

There is a view that there are two kinds of Christians, the converted and those enjoying the higher life of complete consecration. It is suggested that there can be sudden instantaneous leaps from conversion to consecration, as though the believer needs a second conversion. I suspect that those who use such language have a low view of conversion.

The only division spoken of by the Word of God is that between believer and unbeliever, between the spiritually alive and the spiritually dead. Within each of these two groups there are undoubtedly varying measures of sin and grace. And for the believer there needs to be gradual growth in grace, in knowledge, and in spiritual mindedness. But sudden instantaneous leaps from conversion to consecration I do not see in the Bible.

I doubt, indeed, whether a person can be converted if he or she is not consecrated to God. More consecrated he or she can always be, as God's grace grows in them. But to suggest one can experience new birth and not be consecrated suggests to me a poor understanding of what conversion means.

7. Is it wise to teach believers that they ought not to think of struggling against sin, but rather should yield themselves to God?

The expression *Yield yourselves* occurs in only one place in the New Testament (Romans 6:13-19, King James Authorised version). In those verses *yielding ourselves* is spoken of as a duty of believers. But the word 'yield' does not have the sense of putting ourselves passively into the hands of another person. It has much more the sense of actively presenting ourselves for the use of another, as *Offer yourselves to God* (Romans 6:13, New International version).

In any case, twenty or thirty other passages of Scripture teach that believers are not to sit still, but rise up and work. A warfare, a fight, a soldier's life, a wrestling, are spoken of as the characteristic of the Christian life. Why else should we need to put on *the armour of God?* (Ephesians 6:10-18).

People will persist in confounding two things that differ. In Justification we are told to believe, *only* believe; in Sanctification we are told to watch, pray and fight.

I leave my introduction here with much anxiety. There is an attitude among professing Christians today (i.e. the 19th century - Ed.) which fills me with concern for the future. There is an amazing ignorance of Scripture among many, with a consequent lack of true religion. There is an increased taste for the sensational; thousands will crowd to hear a new voice and a new doctrine, without considering whether what they hear is true. Crowds, and crying, and an incessant rousing of the emotions are the only things many care for. So long as the preacher is 'clever' and 'earnest', hundreds seem to think it must be alright.

It is my heart's desire and my daily prayer that personal holiness will greatly increase among professing Christians. And I trust that all who endeavour to promote it will adhere closely to what the Scripture teaches and carefully distinguish between doctrines that differ. What the Lord says is, *if you utter worthy, not worthless, words you will be my spokesman* (Jeremiah 15:19).

¹ **Justify/Justification.** To justify a person is to declare that person to be righteous. It is a forensic word, that is, connected with lawcourts; a judge justifies a person, declaring that person to be in the right. God justifies believers on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done for his people.

² **Sanctify/Sanctification.** Sanctification is that basic work of God's Holy Spirit in believers by which he makes believers increasingly holy (set apart for God). The work is never completed in this life, but will be complete in heaven.

(Definitions taken from *A Dictionary of Theological terms*, published by Grace Publications Trust)