

THOUGHTS
FOR
YOUNG MEN

With an Introduction by Michael Foster

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INTRODUCTION

I'm hoping this introduction will help me solve a problem. Studies indicate that reading books is on a decline, especially among young men. (Then again, studies also claim that veganism is healthy, so it's wise to them with a grain of salt, and—in some cases perhaps—a slab of meat.) That being said, my pastoral experience confirms that getting young men to read is a challenge. And to make things even worse, the odds are good that you didn't even buy this book. Probably, a well-intentioned friend, pastor, or parent gave it to you.

So here's the problem: how do I convince you, a young man who doesn't often read, to read a book you didn't even ask for?

To solve this, I want to ask you for something. It's not something big. All I want is five minutes. In that time, I'll give you three quick reasons why you should read J.C. Ryle's *Thoughts for Young Men*.

If my reasons don't convince you, you've lost nothing but a little time. Plus you'll have gained the assurance that this book probably doesn't have what you're looking for—so you don't need to feel bad about not reading it.

Five minutes. Three reasons. Let's go.

Reason 1: Ryle was manly

Pulpits have long been attractive to soft men seeking an easy life. This is not the reality of the job—because there is nothing soft about being a shepherd in a land of wolves. But unfortunately there is a good reason for the quip that clergy are the third sex. As masculinity has disappeared from the pulpit, men have disappeared from the pews. Nothing is more obnoxious to us than being told to “man up” by effeminate pastors. No one wants health advice from a jiggly tub of lard, and men don’t want instruction on manhood from a limp-wristed minister who can’t make it in the real world.

Ryle was not such a man. He was a beast. His sturdy frame stood well over six foot. He was an accomplished oarsman and co-captain of a cricket team. And he wasn’t just athletically disciplined—he excelled in academics, always near the top of his class. His physical and intellectual prowess is all the more impressive when you consider that he came from a wealthy family. He could have chosen to live as a mollycoddled rich boy, but instead he pursued a life of rigor.

Ryle was tough by choice. Ministry wasn’t a way for him to *escape* manliness, but rather to *exercise* it.

One aspect of Ryle’s manliness you’ll especially appreciate if you read even a few pages of this book is how he communicates. There is no prissy vagueness or mere suggesting. His speech is plain, direct, and sincere. Ryle tells it like it is, but does so without devolving into the barking of a macho blowhard. He cuts to the chase, and to the heart. Ryle doesn’t waste anyone’s time ... including yours.

Reason 2: Ryle was a spiritual bastard

This one might seem bizarre, but hear me out. The term “bastard” has been reduced to a cuss-word in our day. No one really uses it in the original sense, which the 1828 Webster’s dictionary defines as “a child begotten and born out of wedlock; an illegitimate...child.”

J. C. RYLE'S INTRODUCTION

When the apostle Paul wrote his Epistle to Titus about his responsibility as a minister, he mentioned young men as a group requiring particular attention. After speaking of older men and older women, and young women, he adds this advice, "Encourage the young men to be self-controlled" (Titus 2:6). I am going to follow the apostle's advice. I propose to offer a few words of friendly exhortation to young men.

I am growing old myself, but there are few things that I can remember so well as were the days of my youth. I have a most distinct recollection of the joys and the sorrows, the hopes and the fears, the temptations and the difficulties, the mistaken judgments and the misplaced affections, the errors and the aspirations, which surround and accompany a young man's life. If I can only say something to keep some young man walking in the right way, and preserve him from faults and sins which may hurt his prospects both for time and eternity, I shall be very thankful.

There are four things which I propose to do:

I. I will mention some general reasons why young men need exhorting.

II. I will note some special dangers which young men need to be warned about.

III. I will give some general counsel which I beg young men to receive.

IV. I will set down some special rules of conduct which I strongly advise young men to follow.

On each of these four points I have something to say, and I pray to God that what I say may do good to some soul.

I. REASONS FOR EXHORTING YOUNG MEN

What are the general reasons why young men need specific exhortation? I will mention several of them in order.

(1) For one thing, there is the painful fact that there are few young men anywhere who seem to be Christians.

I speak without respect of persons; I say it of all. Rich or poor, gentle or rough, educated or uneducated, in the city or in the country—it makes no difference. I shudder to think how few young men are led by the Spirit, how few are on that narrow road which leads to life, how few are setting their affections on things above, how few are taking up the cross, and following Christ. I say all this with sorrow, but I believe, in God's sight, that I am saying nothing more than the truth.

Young men, you form a large and most important class in the population of this country; but where, and in what condition, are your souls? Regardless of where we turn for an answer, the report will be one and the same! Let us ask any faithful minister of the gospel, and note what he will tell us. How many unmarried young people can he remember who come to the Lord's Supper? Who are the most backward about the doctrines of salvation, the most irregular about Sunday services, the most difficult to draw to weekly Bible studies and

prayer meetings, the most inattentive to whatever is being preached? Which part of his congregation fills him with the most anxiety? Who are the Reubens for whom he has the deepest “searchings of heart”? Who in his flock are the hardest to manage, who require the most frequent warnings and rebukes, who cause him the greatest uneasiness and sorrow, who keep him most constantly in fear for their souls, and seem the most hopeless? Depend on it, his answer will always be, “The Young Men.”

Let us ask the parents in any county throughout this land, and see what they will generally say. Who in their families give them the most pain and trouble? Who need the most watchfulness, and most often provoke and disappoint them? Who are the first to be led away from what is right, and the last to remember cautions and good advice? Who are the most difficult to keep in order and limits? Who most frequently break out into open sin, disgrace the name they bear, make their friends unhappy, embitter the older relatives, and cause them to die with sorrow in their hearts? Depend on it, the answer will generally be, “The Young Men.”

Let us ask the judges and police officers, and note what they will reply. Who goes to the night clubs and bars the most? Who make up street gangs? Who are most often arrested for drunkenness, disturbing the peace, fighting, stealing, assaults, and the like? Who fill the jails, and penitentiaries, and detention homes? Who are the class which requires the most incessant watching and looking after? Depend on it, they will at once point to the same group, they will say, “The Young Men.”

Let us turn to the upper classes, and note the report we will get from them. In one family the sons are always wasting time, health, and money, in the selfish pursuit of pleasure. In another, the sons will follow no profession, and fritter away the most precious years of their life in doing nothing. In another, they take up a profession as a mere form, but pay no attention to its duties. In another, they are always forming

wrong connections, gambling, getting into debt, associating with bad companions, keeping their friends in a constant fever of anxiety. Note that rank, and title, and wealth, and education, do not prevent these things! Anxious fathers, and heart-broken mothers, and sorrowing sisters, could tell sad stories about them, if the truth were known. Many a family, with everything this world can give, numbers among its relatives some name that is never named, or only named with regret and shame, some son, some brother, some cousin, some nephew, who will have his own way, and is a grief to all who know him.

There is seldom a rich family which hasn't got some thorn in its side, some blot in its page of happiness, some constant source of pain and anxiety; and often, far too often—the true cause is, “The Young Men.”

What shall we say to these things? These are facts, plain facts, facts which meet us on every side, facts which cannot be denied. How dreadful this is! How dreadful the thought, that every time I meet a young man, I meet one who is in all probability an enemy of God, traveling on the wide road which leads to hell, unfit for heaven! Surely, with such facts before me, will you not wonder that I exhort you; you must allow that there is a good reason.

(2) Death and judgment are waiting for young men, even as it waits for others, and they nearly all seem to forget it.

Young men, it is appointed for you to die; and no matter how strong and healthy you may be now, the day of your death is perhaps very near. I see young people sick as well as the elderly. I bury youthful corpses as well as aged. I read the names of persons no older than yourselves in every graveyard. I learn from books that, excepting infancy and old age, more die between thirteen and twenty-three than at any other period of life. And yet you live as if you were sure that presently you will never die.

Are you thinking you will pay attention to these things tomorrow? Remember the words of Solomon, “Do not boast about tomorrow,

for you do not know what a day may bring forth" (Prov. 27:1). "I will worry about serious things tomorrow," said an unsaved person, to one who warned him of coming danger; but his tomorrow never came. Tomorrow is the devil's day, but today is God's. Satan does not care how spiritual your intentions are, or how holy your resolutions, if only they are determined to be done tomorrow. Oh, give no place to the devil in this matter! All men don't live to be elderly fathers, like Isaac and Jacob. Many children die before their fathers. David had to mourn the death of his two finest sons; Job lost all of his ten children in one day. Your lot may be like one of theirs, and when death comes, it will be vain to talk of tomorrow: you must go at once.

Do you think that you will have a more convenient time to think about these things? So thought Felix and the Athenians to whom Paul preached; but it never came. The road to hell is paved with such ideas. Better make sure to work while you can. Leave nothing unsettled that is eternal. Run no risk when your soul is at stake. Believe me, the salvation of a soul is no easy matter. Everyone needs a "Great salvation," whether young or old: all need to be born again, all need to be washed in Christ's blood, all need to be sanctified by the Spirit. Happy is that man who does not leave these things uncertain, but never rests until he has the witness of the Spirit within him, testifying to him that he is a child of God.

Young men, your time is short. Your days are but a brief shadow, a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes, a story that is soon told. Your bodies are not made of brass. "Even the young men," says Isaiah, "stumble and fall" (Is. 40:30). Your health may be taken from you in a moment: it only needs an accident, a fever, an inflammation, a broken blood-vessel, and the worm would soon feed upon you in the grave. There is but a step between any one of you and death. This night your soul might be required of you. You are fast going the way of all the earth; you will soon be gone. Your life is all uncertainty; your death and judgment are perfectly sure. You too must hear the

Archangel's trumpet, and go forth to stand before the great white throne of judgment. You too must obey that summons, which Jerome says was always ringing in his ears: "Get up, you dead, and come to judgment." "Yes, I am coming soon," is the language of the Judge Himself. I cannot, dare not, will not let you alone.

Oh that you would all take to heart the words of the Preacher: "Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment" (Eccl. 11:9). Amazing, that with such a prospect of coming judgment, any man can be careless and unconcerned! Surely none are so crazy as those who are content to live unprepared to die. Surely the unbelief of men is the most amazing thing in the world. The clearest prophecy in the Bible begins with these words, "Who has believed our message?" (Is. 53:1). The Lord Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). Young men, I fear this be the report of many of you in the courts above: "They will not believe." I fear you be hurried out of the world, and awake to find out, too late, that death and judgment are realities. I fear all this, and therefore I exhort you.

(3) What young men will be, in all probability depends on what they are now, and they seem to forget this.

Youth is the planting time of full age, the molding season in the little space of human life, the turning point in the history of man's mind.

By the shoot that springs up we can judge the type of tree that is growing, by the blossoms we judge the kind of fruit, by the spring we judge the type of harvest coming, by the morning we judge the coming day, and by the character of the young man, we may generally judge what he will be when he grows up.

Young men, do not be deceived. Don't think you can, at will, serve lusts and pleasures in your beginning, and then go and serve God

with ease at your latter end. Don't think that you can live with Esau, and then die with Jacob. It is a mockery to deal with God and your souls in such a fashion. It is an awful mockery to suppose you can give the flower of your strength to the world and the devil, and then put off the King of kings with the scraps and remains of your hearts, the wreck and remnant of your powers. It is an awful mockery, and you may find to your loss that the thing cannot be done.

I dare say you are planning on a late repentance. You do not know what you are doing. You are planning without God. Repentance and faith are the gifts of God, and they are gifts that He often withholds, when they have been long offered in vain. I grant you, true repentance is never too late, but I warn you at the same time, late repentance is seldom true. I grant you, one penitent thief was converted in his last hours, that no man might despair; but I warn you, only one was converted, that no man might presume. I grant you it is written, Jesus is "able to save completely those who come to God through him" (Heb. 7:25). But I warn you, it is also written by the same Spirit, "Since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you" (Prov. 1:24, 26).

Believe me, you will find it no easy matter to turn to God whenever you please. It is a true saying of the godly Leighton, "The way of sin is downhill; a man cannot stop when he wants too." Holy desires and serious convictions are not like the servants of the centurion, ready to come and go at your desire; rather they are like the unicorn in Job: they will not obey your voice, nor attend at your bidding. It was said of the famous general Hannibal of old, when he could have taken the city he warred against, he would not, and in time when he would, he could not. Beware lest the same kind of thing happens to you in the matter of eternal life.

Why do I say all this? I say it because of the force of habit. I say it because experience tells me that people's hearts are seldom changed if

they are not changed when young. Seldom indeed are men converted when they are old. Habits have deep roots. Once sin is allowed to settle in your heart, it will not be turned out at your bidding. Custom becomes second nature, and its chains are not easily broken. The prophet has well said, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil" (Jer. 13:23). Habits are like stones rolling downhill—the further they roll, the faster and more ungovernable is their course. Habits, like trees, are strengthened by age. A boy may bend an oak when it is a sapling—a hundred men cannot root it up, when it is a full grown tree. A child can wade over the Thames River at its fountainhead—the largest ship in the world can float in it when it gets near the sea. So it is with habits: the older, the stronger—the longer they have held possession, the harder they will be to cast out. They grow with our growth, and strengthen with our strength. Custom is the nurse of sin. Every fresh act of sin lessens fear and remorse, hardens our hearts, blunts the edge of our conscience, and increases our evil inclination.

Young men, you may fancy I am laying too much stress on this point. If you had seen old men, as I have, on the brink of the grave, without any feelings, seared, callous, dead, cold, hard as stone—you would not think so. Believe me, you cannot stand still in your souls. Habits of good or evil are daily strengthening in your hearts. Every day you are either getting nearer to God, or further off. Every year that you continue unrepentant, the wall of division between you and heaven becomes higher and thicker, and the gulf to be crossed deeper and broader. Oh, dread the hardening effect of constant lingering in sin! Now is the accepted time. See that your decision not be put off until the winter of your days. If you do not seek the Lord when young, the strength of habit is such that you will probably never seek Him at all.

I fear this, and therefore I exhort you.

(4) The devil uses special diligence to destroy the souls of young men, and they don't seem to know it.

Satan knows very well that you will make up the next generation, and therefore he employs every trick to make you his own. I would not have you to be ignorant of his schemes.

You are those on whom he puts his choicest temptations. He spreads his net with the most watchful carefulness, to entangle your hearts. He baits his trap with the sweetest morsels, to get you into his power. He displays his wares before your eyes with his utmost ingenuity, in order to make you buy his sugared poisons and eat his accursed treats. You are the grand object of his attack. May the Lord rebuke him, and deliver you out of his hands.

Young men, beware of being taken by his snares. He will try to throw dust in your eyes, and prevent you seeing anything in its true colors. He would eagerly make you think that evil is good, and good is evil. He will paint, cover with gold, and dress up sin, in order to make you fall in love with it. He will deform, and misrepresent, and fabricate true Christianity, in order to make you take a dislike to it. He will exalt the pleasures of wickedness—but he will hide from you the sting. He will lift up before your eyes the cross and its painfulness—but he will keep out of sight the eternal crown. He will promise you everything, as he did to Christ, if you will only serve him. He will even help you to wear a form of Christianity, if you will only neglect the power. He will tell you at the beginning of your lives, it is too soon to serve God—he will tell you at the end, it is too late. Oh, do not be deceived!

You don't know the danger you are in from this enemy; and it is this very ignorance which makes me afraid. You are like blind men, walking among holes and pitfalls; you do not see the perils which are around you on every side.

Your enemy is mighty. He is called “the Prince of this world” (John 14:30). He opposed our Lord Jesus Christ all through His ministry. He tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, and so brought