



## **R** BOOK REVIEW // HOLINESS J. C. RYLE // REVIEWED BY CASSIE WATSON

We live in the golden age of self-improvement. With the click of a BuzzFeed link you'll get the latest hacks for productivity or cleaning. Scroll through Amazon and you can find products to meet every need you have—to fix your finances, your family, your home.

Some of these can be genuinely helpful (I'll gladly take anything that makes cleaning faster!). But we get into trouble when we bring our focus on self-improvement and our easier-is-better mindset to the Christian life. When it comes to growth in holiness, we don't need the latest shiny advice—we need old wisdom. J. C. Ryle's time-tested classic *Holiness* is one such source of wisdom.

Ryle examines the Scriptures for what they teach us about holiness. He holds holiness up as a precious jewel, letting us see its beauty so we desire to have more of it. Most importantly, he keeps our eyes on Jesus, showing that Christ is central in holiness—he is the why, the who, and the how of our sanctification.

### **WHY SHOULD WE BE HOLY? BECAUSE OF JESUS CHRIST.**

When we look at the cross that Jesus endured, we get a glimpse of how wicked sin is. If sin was no big deal, Jesus wouldn't have to die to free us from it.

God hates sin the smallest speck of sin, just as an infinite, all-seeing, holy God should. But “we, on the other hand—poor blind creatures, here today and gone to-morrow, born in sin, surrounded

by sinners, living in a constant atmosphere of weakness, infirmity, and imperfection—can form none but the most inadequate conceptions of the hideousness of evil” (32).

If we love Jesus, we want to be close to him—and so, we want to stay clear of the sin he hates. Ryle often looks ahead to heaven, when we will finally be free from sin. He doesn't write about heaven with vague sentimentality. He longs for heaven because that is where we will be with Christ.

*Most men hope to go to heaven when they die; but few, it may be feared, take the trouble to consider whether they would enjoy heaven if they got there. Heaven is essentially a holy place; its inhabitants are all holy; its occupations are all holy. To be really happy in heaven, it is clear and plain that we must be somewhat trained and made ready for heaven while we are on earth.* (51)

So for the love Jesus Christ, and the desire to be with him in heaven, let's pursue holiness. But even as I say that, you may object, “Surely holiness isn't something we get for ourselves?” Ryle addresses this too.

### **WHO MAKES US HOLY? JESUS CHRIST.**

As those standing proudly downstream from the Reformation, we insist upon the primacy of justification. We're saved by faith, not by our works. And this is right to affirm. But Ryle points out that we minimise the glory of our Saviour when we

forget the totality of his work:

*The Lord Jesus has undertaken everything that His people's souls require; not only to deliver them from the guilt of their sins by His atoning death, but from the dominion of their sins, by placing in their hearts the Holy Spirit; not only to justify them, but also to sanctify them. (44)*

Christ justifies us; Christ sanctifies us. He does what we could never do for ourselves, and he doesn't leave out anything we need.

This doesn't mean we have no part in pursuing holiness. To the contrary, Ryle devotes entire chapters in *Holiness* to matters like active spiritual warfare and counting (and paying) the cost of holiness. Yet even the part we play takes us back to Christ.

### HOW CAN WE BE HOLY? THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

Day by day, moment by moment, we turn to Christ, plead with Christ, draw from Christ, believe in Christ. Communion with our Lord is the means by

which we pursue holiness—it's not some separate activity apart from our faith in Jesus. Ryle writes,

*To live the life of daily faith in the Son of God, and to be daily drawing out of His fulness the promised grace and strength which He has laid up for His people—this is the grand secret of progressive sanctification. Believers who seem at a standstill are generally neglecting close communion with Jesus, and so grieving the Spirit. (61)*

Ryle will put fire in your heart for the pursuit of holiness—not so you can boast or look down upon others, but so you may know and love Jesus more. So let's leave off our preference for quick fixes and surface-level behavioural change. Let's remind ourselves that the Christian life is not meant to be easy. The old wisdom of J. C. Ryle shows us a different way—the way to Jesus, who is himself Wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30). Read this book and you'll come away proclaiming with Ryle that “Christ is all.”

### ‘Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God’

In this classic collection of soul nourishing essays, as relevant and helpful today as when first published in 1877, Ryle endeavours, ‘by God's help, to examine what true holiness is, and the reason why it is so needful’

The first part of the book examines the doctrine of holiness, from sin and sanctification, to holiness, our fight for personal holiness, what it costs to be a true Christian, growth in grace and how a lack of holiness often leads to lack of assurance.

In the second part Ryle gives warmly drawn instruction from scriptural characters. Moses, Lot, Lot's wife, the dying thief and the Lord himself, teach us valuable lessons about holiness or the sad effects of its lack.

Holiness concludes with a collection of practical and devotional essays, ending with the exhortation ‘Let us live on Christ. Let us live in Christ. Let us live with Christ. Let us live to Christ. So doing, we shall prove that we fully realize that “Christ is all.” So doing, we shall feel great peace, and attain more of that “holiness without which no man shall see the Lord”’

#### *About the author*

John Charles Ryle (1816–1900) was an Evangelical Anglican, who after 39 years service in country parishes was appointed bishop of Liverpool in 1880. His many writings still published, read & unequalled today, include, *Notes on the Gospels*, *Practical Religion* and *Heading for Heaven*.

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