



J.C. Ryle:

How God shaped one reluctant clergyman into a powerful tool for gospel proclamation

There is a golden thread that runs through the Bible which can sometimes go unnoticed by some. It involves this road that we travel on. For all God's children of all generations, the walk of faith that we are engaged in does not occur in a vacuum, rather it occurs in an onward and upward motion, spiritually speaking. We often forget the fact that this road that we are on is marked by the grinding footprints and cross-dragging induced furrows of many saints who before us have had to travel the same road on their way to glory (Matt. 7:13-14). This is a walk that has been attempted and completed by many of the Lord's dear followers of old. There is therefore much that we can learn from the pages of church history, in particular from Christian biography (Prov. 13:20). As Paul instructed the Corinthians, we would be wise to imitate them too, as we diligently imitate the Lord (1 Cor. 11:1).

One such saint that deserves recognition at this juncture is a man by the name of John Charles, or J.C. Ryle.¹ The son of a wealthy banker, Ryle was born in the town of Macclesfield within the region of Cheshire, England, on 10 May, 1816. Like many other boys he took a liking in different kinds of sports during his teenage years, but especially excelled at the activities of rowing and the game of cricket. After his transfer to Christ Church, Oxford in 1834, his cricket playing career reached its crescendo in an 1836 Varsity match at Lords, when he took no less than 10 wickets in a bowling effort, sealing the match for Oxford.

Events leading to his repentance:

But this also marked a turning point for the young Ryle. According to his own testimony this was the time in his life that the Lord used to get his attention and to turn him from himself and his sin, and to embrace the Lord. His aspirations and hopes came to a screeching halt some time prior to his writing of his final exams when he was struck with a serious infection which severely affected his respiratory system.

The illness, of course, was no fluke. The Lord knew exactly how he would get the young Ryle's attention. For the first time in fourteen years he would read his Bible and seek the Lord's presence in prayer. Far from being an unfortunate event, physical affliction is what got him to take the Lord seriously and is what ultimately lead to his being saved. In particular, the Lord used a well-known passage by the apostle Paul to the Ephesian Church when he instructed them in chapter two with regards to the reality of their salvation:

¹ Biographical information obtained from "Banner of Truth" trust. See: <https://banneroftruth.org/us/about/banner-authors/j-c-ryle/> for more information.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). The reading of these words is what sparked his conversion when he repented of sin and trusted in the Lord for the forgiveness of sin, unassisted by any other instruction.

Suffering paves the way to lifelong ministry

Soon he would transfer to London to study law since he desired to pursue a career in politics. This plan however was obstructed when he started to suffer from the same chest problems as a few years earlier induced by the intense air pollution in the busy hub of London. After six months in there he gave up studying law because of his illness, but the plan to enter politics in general was finally crushed in 1841 when his father’s bank failed, leaving him without the means to pay for his studies. It was at such time that Ryle considered entering the ministry through the Church of England who would allow him to be ordained because he held a degree from Oxford. Many years afterwards Ryle would eventually comment on the circumstances which lead to his approach of the pastoral ministry. He personally wrote about these events, saying: “I have not the least doubt, it was all for the best. If I had not been ruined, I should never have been a clergyman, never have preached a sermon, or written a tract or book.”

He elaborated on this by commenting that the ministry was something that he approached quite reluctantly at first, as biographer Peter Toon (1975:59) highlights.² In his own words Ryle is quoted saying: “I never had any particular desire to become a clergyman, and those who fancied that my self will and natural tastes were gratified by it were totally and entirely mistaken. I became a clergyman because I felt shut up to do it, and saw no other course of life open to me.”

However, as with his coming to salvation, the Lord intended for a deepening of his appreciation for the pastoral ministry, once again as this was facilitated through trials. Frankly, trials became a standard feature of his life soon after the first few years of his ministry. Starting his pastoral ministry with the Chapel of Ease in Exbury, Hampshire, his ministerial life by no means became an *easy* feat, especially after first moving on from Exbury to become rector of St Thomas’s congregation in Winchester around 1843, and then again to resign from that post and be transferred and ordained as rector of Helmingham in Suffolk about a year later. It was during his ministry at Helmingham that he underwent tremendous trials that would shape the rest of his days when he married and was widowed twice.

These tragedies were followed by fervent efforts of writing tracts and essays, especially his well-known Expository Thoughts on the Gospels that were published, concluding with his commentary on the Gospel of John in 1869. It was yet again at this time that the Lord sent another trial when his third wife, Henrietta died in 1889. It was early in the same decade (1880) that Ryle became the first bishop of Liverpool and remained in the position until his death in 1900, having retired from the position at age 83 a few months earlier.

In addition to his physical and personal suffering, Ryle also had to endure some public hostility toward him which was largely motivated by his unflinching regard for

² Toon, Peter. J.C. Ryle: a Self-Portrait, a Partial Autobiography. Swengel, PA: Reiner.

biblical authority. John Piper highlighted this in a sermon during the 2012 “Desiring God Conference for Pastors” quoting some of the attackers of Ryle.³One specific critic of the “Liverpool Review” wrote of Ryle in November of 1885 that:

“Dr. Ryle is simply about the most disastrous episcopal failure ever inflicted upon a long-suffering diocese. . . . He is nothing better than a political fossil, who has been very unwisely unearthed from his rural obscurity for no better purpose apparently than to make the episcopacy ridiculous.”

Regardless, of such attacks, Ryle did indeed leave the church an example of unequivocal commitment to the Lord and what he has commanded his people. To this characteristic of Ryle his successor at Liverpool described him as “the man of granite with the heart of a child.”

There are many good biographies of the life of J.C. Ryle and the aim of my writing is not to share any new insights into his life and ministry. Rather, my aim is to highlight only a few of the notable characteristics of the man and hope that his example will in some way bless us as a church. So here follows a review of a few aspects of the ministry of J.C. Ryle that I particularly found helpful in my own spiritual and theological growth:

One notable characteristic of Ryle was his skill in biblical exposition and his commitment to correct false assumptions about the Bible. This was balanced by a life of practical devotion to the Lord. As was already pointed out, his passion for sound theology and Christian living is what lead to his writing of commentaries on all four of the Gospels. Notably, his commentary on the Gospel of John is what deserves particular attention at this juncture. During the prime of his career and at the height of his maturation as a minister he penned the words to this much loved, verse-by-verse treatment of John’s Gospel.

There are a few examples from this commentary that deserve attention:

1. Disagreement with certain fallacies within Roman doctrine

One fine example of good exposition is found in Ryle’s countering of Roman Catholic doctrine right at the beginning of his commentary on John. Commenting on John’s introduction of the ministry of John the Baptist, Ryle makes the important point that the Baptist’s role was never a mediatory role. Rather, his role was to be a witness to the fact that the Mediator has come. Commenting on chapter one, verses 6-13, he says:

“Christian ministers are not priests, nor mediators between God and man. They are not agents into whose hands men may commit their souls, and carry on their religion by deputy. They are witnesses. They are intended to bear testimony to God's truth, and specially to the great truth that Christ is the only Savior and light of the world. This was Peter's ministry on the day of Pentecost. "With many other words did he testify." (Acts 2:40.) This was the whole tenor of Paul's ministry. "He testified both to the Jews and Greeks repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 20:21.) Unless a Christian minister bears a full testimony to Christ, he is not faithful to his office. So long as he does testify of Christ, he has done his part,

³ See full sermon: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-frank-and-manly-mr-ryle-the-value-of-a-masculine-ministry>

and will receive his reward, although his hearers may not believe his testimony. Until a minister's hearers believe on that Christ of whom they are told, they receive no benefit from the ministry. They may be pleased and interested; but they are not profited until they believe. The great end of a minister's testimony is 'that through him, men may believe.'"

What is evident is that Ryle understood the importance of the pastoral ministry, not as a mediatory role between men and God, rather as the most important example men will have about service and commitment unto God. As becomes apparent in his writing, he understood the main responsibility of the pastor as testifying of Christ. He took yet another opportunity to confound Roman Catholic doctrine, simultaneously punting the biblical importance of matrimony between a man and a woman when he commented on the wedding feast in Cana in chapter two, saying:

"Marriage is not a sacrament, as the Church of Rome asserts. It is simply a state of life ordained by God for man's benefit. But it is a state which ought never to be spoken of with levity, or regarded with disrespect. The Prayerbook service has well described it, as "an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, and signifying unto us the mystical union that is between Christ and his Church." Society is never in a healthy condition, and true religion never flourishes in that land where the marriage tie is lightly esteemed. They who lightly esteem it have not the mind of Christ."

Although he was not at all convinced that marriage is a sacrament as is true of Catholic doctrine, he nevertheless believed in the sanctity and God-given nature of marriage, something which catholic priests were sadly denied. His words are almost prophetic of society today, which is clearly not in a healthy condition exactly because of a massive disregard of marriage in general.

However, Ryle did simultaneously have a high regard for the expression of Christian joy. This also becomes evident in his handling of the wedding feast in John 2. Offering a stern warning against frivolous recreation which can surely lead people into sin and "dissipation," as he refers to it, he also reminds us that good kinds of recreation can and must certainly be enjoyed. Ryle was by no means a pietist who saw everything as licentious. Instead he fervently advocated good natured fun and recreation with friends, family and church. "The servant of Christ," he insisted likewise "has no right to hand over innocent recreation, and family gatherings to the devil and the world." The realm should be obvious. For he says (this time, perhaps scrutinising monasticism) "the Christian who withdraws entirely from the society of his fellow-men, and walks the earth with a face as melancholy as if he was always attending a funeral, does injury to to the cause of the Gospel." It is this very gospel of the good news of salvation that Ryle understood very well.

2. A firm grasp of the gospel

The gospel was primary to J.C. Ryle in all activities of his pastoral ministry. And the gospel is exactly that which Ryle sought to defend throughout his ministry. He was hardly impressed by showy outward appearances, or an image of godliness and an assumed comprehension of the gospel. Rather, during his time already, the core tenets of the faith were already being heavily attacked in various forms within English Protestant denominations.

And so he, for example commented on Nicodemus' striking ignorance involving the saving grace of Christ in John chapter three. Of all people Nicodemus should have

known the truth of salvation, he should have known the gospel, yet he did not understand Jesus' instruction in the new birth. To this he said:

“Ignorance like that of Nicodemus is unhappily far too common in the Church of Christ. We must never be surprised if we find it in quarters where we might reasonably expect knowledge. Learning, and rank, and high ecclesiastical office are no proof that a minister is taught by the Spirit. The successors of Nicodemus, in every age, are far more numerous than the successors of Peter.

Or stated differently, those who do not understand the gospel outweigh those who truly understand it. The difference between learnedness and true blessedness to Ryle rested firmly on one's understanding of the gospel. For the learned the gospel must be made more complicated than it truly is, at least for it to be more intellectual. For the one who truly is blessed by the gospel, being truly saved through its message, the gospel is an understandable and uncomplicated message. Ryle at least made this much clear when in his handling of the same passage, he appeals to the necessity of childlike faith. Some might have protested such 'ignorant simplicity' in his day already, yet faith is what makes right between sinners and God. As he so wonderfully explains:

“It is true that we are sinners--but Christ has suffered for us. It is true that we deserve death--but Christ has died for us. It is true that we are guilty debtors--but Christ has paid our debts with His own blood. This is the real Gospel! This is the good news! On this let us lean while we live. To this let us cling when we die. Christ has been "lifted up" on the cross, and has thrown open the gates of heaven to all believers.”

3. A commitment to justification by faith alone

Essentially, Ryle understood that faith is what made all the difference. The gospel only becomes effectively 'good news' to the person hearing it if they respond rightly through faith. Faith meant the difference between those who are still guilty of their sins, and those who are already acquitted. And this faith is what Ryle believed was the only thing necessary to receive pardon from the holy God. And so he insists that “faith in the Lord Jesus is the very key of salvation. He that has it has life, and he that has it not has not life.” The equation is easy enough to understand. In the absence of faith there can be no right standing with God. But the opposite is equally true, yet infinitely more blessed. And so he encourages: “But if we will only come to Christ as guilty sinners, and believe on Him, our sins shall at once be forgiven, and our iniquities shall be entirely put away. Without faith there is no salvation; but through faith in Jesus, the vilest sinner may be saved.”

4. An understanding of the gospel as an invitation and a provision to all

One last highlight from Ryle's commentary on the gospel of John that deserves a distinction is his understanding of the gospel message as an invitation to all. For a man of his theological upbringing his view of the atonement of Christ and the resultant universal invitation of the gospel unto all people placed him in a fervent disagreement with those who hold to the view of particular atonement.

In this regard Ryle draws attention to the fact that what was required of the Israelites in the dessert to live and not die from snake venom, is exactly what God has required from all people, indiscriminately, in their response to the cross of Christ. The formula made perfect sense to Ryle. The invitation was for every Israelite to look at the lifted up bronze serpent and live. In the same way, the invitation is for every sinner to look

at Christ, lifted up in the cross, and believe. He not only saw the cross as an invitation to all, but also as an invitation to all to believe and receive forgiveness. Commenting on Chapter three, verse 15 he says:

“The Son of man must be lifted up on the cross, that whosoever believes on Him, or looks to Him by faith, as the Israelite looked to the brazen serpent, should not perish in hell.

The expression ‘whosoever’ deserves special notice. It might have been equally well translated ‘every one.’ It is intended to show us the width and breadth of Christ’s offer of salvation. They are for ‘every one,’ without exception, who ‘believes.’”

This is enforced by Ryle’s explanation of Jesus eventual words to Nicodemus about the nature of the love of God in what is probably the most well-known verse in the entire Bible: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). The love which God showed the world, Ryle explains, was indeed for all the world, i.e. every single person who ever lived. He cemented his understanding of the extent of the cross in his commentary by saying: “Our Lord here declares to [Nicodemus] that God loves all the world, without any exception; that the Messiah, the only begotten Son of God, is the Father’s gift to the whole family of Adam; and that every one, whether Jew or Gentile, who believes on Him for salvation, may have eternal life.” In Ryle’s estimation, views that minimise the provision of the cross only to the elect “refuse to God that attribute of compassion with which even an earthly father can regard a profligate son, and can offer to him pardon, even though his compassion is despised and his offers refused.”

These are aspects of the man’s interpretation of the Bible that become evident in his commentary in John. But there are however other aspects of his theology that deserve mention which are not necessarily observed in his commentary on John. These are areas of theology which he addressed elsewhere in other publications. We will address these starting with Ryle’s uncommon-for-an-Anglican view of eschatology, or the study of the end times:

5. A firm grasp on eschatology and love for the Lord’s return

One noteworthy aspect of Ryle’s theology is that he held to a premillennial understanding of the end times. This certainly made him stand out among his peers in England who, for the majority, saw no literal thousand-year reign of Christ in the Bible, rather they understood this as figurative. What is truly interesting about his eschatological outlook on Scripture is that he was not only a strong premillennialist but also somewhat a dispensationalist. As Mal Couch (2000:113) points out, “concerning prophetic issues, he was a careful conservative; yet he held firmly to the premillennial return of Christ to establish His earthly kingdom.”

In his 1867 book “Coming Events and Present Duties” he highlighted eleven “articles” that should spur all students of the Bible to be serious about the second coming of Christ. Some of them are as follows:

“I believe that the world will never be completely converted to Christianity by any existing agency, before the end comes.”

“I believe that the widespread unbelief, indifference, formalism, and wickedness, which are to be seen throughout Christendom, are only what we are taught to expect in God’s Word.”

“I believe that the great purpose of the present dispensation is to gather out of the world an elect people, and not to convert all mankind. All mankind will not turn to Christ!”

“I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is the great event which will wind up the present dispensation, and for which we ought daily to long and pray.”

“I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be a real, literal, personal, bodily coming; and that as He went away in the clouds of heaven with His body, before the eyes of men, so in like manner He will return (Acts 1:11).

“I believe that after our Lord Jesus Christ comes again, the earth shall be renewed, and the curse removed; the devil shall be bound, the godly shall be rewarded, the wicked shall be punished.”

“I believe that the Jews shall ultimately be gathered again as a separate nation, restored to their own land, and converted to the faith of Christ, after going through the great tribulation.”

“I believe that the literal sense of the Old Testament prophecies has been far too much neglected by the Churches... and that under the mistaken system of spiritualizing and accommodating Bible language, Christians have too often completely missed its meaning (Luke 24:25-26).

“I do not believe the preterist scheme of interpreting the Apocalypse, which regards the book as almost entirely fulfilled...”

Evidently, Ryle understood the importance of opting for the “normal” reading of Scripture. This certainly led him to his belief in a literal millennium that is still in the future.

6. A Commitment to holiness

One last feature of J.C. Ryle’s ministry that deserves mention was his commitment to holy living. His orthodoxy could hardly be separated from his practice. However, it was his understanding of the nature of salvation that led him to believe in the indispensability of holy living, or sanctification.

He insisted that sanctification is the necessary result of being justified by faith. He explained it this way in his 1879 book, “Holiness:”

“In what then, are justification and sanctification alike: a. Both proceed originally from the free grace of God. It is of His gift alone that believers are justified or sanctified at all. b. Both are part of that great work of salvation which Christ, in the eternal covenant, has undertaken on behalf of His people. Christ is the fountain of life, from which pardon and holiness both flow. The root of each is Christ. c. Both are to be found in the same persons. Those who are justified are always sanctified, and those who are sanctified are always justified. God has joined them together, and they cannot be put asunder. d. Both begin at the same time. The moment a person begins to be a

justified person, he also begins to be a sanctified person. He may not feel it, but it is a fact...”

If a person claimed to be saved then sanctification would have to be a part of their life. Ryle’s understanding of the Scriptures led him to this conviction. In the same book claims that sanctification is the to-be-expected result of anyone who enjoys union with Christ. For instance, referring to Christ’s imagery of the vine and the branches in John 15, he explains that if there is no vitality (sanctification) in the branches then one can assume that there is no life (salvation) at all. “The branch which bears no fruit is no living branch of the vine. The union with Christ which produces no effect on heart and life is a mere formal union, which is worthless before God.”

And this kind of union will be especially visible in the things that are important to the person who claims Christ as his own. Ryle explains that this union:

“...constrains a man to live unto the Lord from a deep sense of gratitude for redemption. It makes him feel that he can never do too much for Him that died for him. Being much forgiven, he loves much. He who, the blood cleanses walks in the light. He who has real lively hope in Christ purifieth himself even as He is pure (James 2:17-20; Titus 1:1; Gal. 5:6; 1 John 1:7; 3:3).”

To conclude, J.C. Ryle stands out in Church history as a true defender of the core doctrines of Scripture. As his numerous tracts, pamphlets and books make plain, he remained squarely committed to the cause of the gospel until his dying day. Trials, God’s crucible for spiritual refinement, is what authenticated him as a credible minister of the Good News. Christians of all walks of life, and of all ages, would be wise to study the heritage of Christian literature that Ryle left behind.