

LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF J. C. RYLE

PART 4 – CONVERSION

*"I say that all these principles seemed to grow upon my mind about the winter after I was 21... All these things, I repeat, seemed to flash upon me like a sunbeam in the winter of 1837, and have stuck in my mind from that time down to this. People may account for such a change as they like, my own belief is, that no rational explanation can be given of it, but that of the Bible; it was what the Bible calls 'conversion', and 'regeneration'. Before that time I was dead in sins, and on the high road to hell, and from that time, I became alive, and had a hope of heaven. And nothing to my mind can account for it, but the free sovereign grace of God. It was the greatest event and change in my life, and has had an influence over the whole of my subsequent character and history."*¹ – J. C. Ryle

I. Necessity

Matthew 18:2-3; Luke 13:1-5; John 3:3; Acts 3:19-21; I Thessalonians 1:9-10

*"Some worthy people are ready enough to admit that conversion is a scriptural truth and a reality, but not a thing which needs to be pressed on most English people. The heathen, they grant, need conversion. Even the thieves, and fallen characters, and inmates of jails, they allow, may require conversion. But to talk of conversion being necessary for church-going people, is to talk of things which they cannot see at all. 'Such people may, in some cases, need a little stirring up and amendment. They may not be quite as good as they ought to be: it would be better if they attended more to religion; but you have no right to say they need conversion! It is uncharitable, harsh, narrow-minded, bitter, wrong, to tell them they require conversion!'"*²

*"This sadly common notion is a complete delusion. It is a pure invention of man's, without a scrap of foundation in God's Word. The Bible teaches expressly that the change of heart, called conversion, is a thing absolutely needed by everyone... All people born into the world, of every rank and nation, must have their hearts changed between the cradle and the grave, before they can go to heaven. All, all men, without exception, must be converted."*³

*"No one, however wise, wealthy, noble, or beautiful, will ever get to heaven without CONVERSION."*⁴

*"Without conversion there is no salvation."*⁵

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Bishop J. C. Ryle's Autobiography: The Early Years*, 73.

² J. C. Ryle, *Old Paths* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 307. *Old Paths* was first published in 1877.

³ *Old Paths*, 308.

⁴ *Old Paths*, 303.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Practical Religion* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 9. *Practical Religion* was first published in 1878.

II. Tangibility

Acts 9:20-22; I Corinthians 6:9-11; II Corinthians 5:17

"Many would like much to escape the punishment of sin, who will not strive to be free from its power; they wish to be justified but not to be sanctified; they desire much to have God's favour, but they care little for God's image and likeness; their talk is of pardon, but not of purity; they think much about God's willingness to forgive, but little about his warning that we be renewed. But this is leaving out of sight half the work which Christ died to perform."⁶

"When a man's heart is turned upside down in the way I have described, so that he loves what he once hated, and hates what he once loved, I say boldly, that it is a case of conversion. To deny it is mere obstinacy and affectation. Such a change can be described in no other way. By far the most suitable name that can be given to it is the scriptural name,—conversion."⁷

"Sense of sin and deep hatred of it, faith in Christ and love to him, delight in holiness and longing after more of it, love to God's people and distaste for the things of the world,—these, these are the signs and evidences which always accompany conversion."⁸

"No doubt there are plenty of sham conversions in such a day of religious excitement as this. But bad coin is no proof that there is no good money: nay, rather it is a sign that there is some money current which is valuable, and is worth imitation. Hypocrites and sham Christians are indirect evidence that there is such a thing as real grace among men."⁹

III. Dependency

Deuteronomy 30:6; Matthew 11:25-27; John 3:7-8; Titus 3:3-7

"This new birth, then, this great spiritual change, whence comes it, and how does it begin? Can any man give it to himself when he pleases? Can any change his own heart? No! The thing is impossible. We can no more quicken and impart life to our souls than we can to our bodies; we can no more rise and become new men in our own strength than wash away sins by our own performances. It is impossible! The natural man is as helpless as Lazarus was when he lay still and cold and motionless in the tomb. We may remove the stone, as it were, and expose the sad work of death, but we can do no more. There must be a power far mightier than any power of earth in exercise before the natural man can awake and arise and come forth as a new creature."¹⁰

"As for me, I make my supplication unto God, who can make all things new, that his Spirit may touch your hearts with a deep sense of this truth, for without it my preaching is vain; that there may be a mighty shaking and revival among the dry bones; that you may never rest until you are indeed new men and can say, Verily we were dead but we are now alive, we were lost but we are now found."¹¹

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *The Christian Race* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2025), 46. *The Christian Race* contains a collection of several sermons preached by Ryle, the first of its kind, and was first published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1900.

⁷ *Old Paths*, 306.

⁸ *Practical Religion*, 10.

⁹ *Practical Religion*, 10.

¹⁰ *The Christian Race*, 27.

¹¹ *The Christian Race*, 23.

IV. Urgency

II Corinthians 13:5; Hebrews 3:12-13

"Believe me, you will find it no easy matter to turn to God just when you please. It is a true saying of Archbishop Leighton: 'The way of sin is down hill; a man cannot stop when he would.' Holy desires and serious convictions are not like the servants of the centurion, ready to come and go at your desire (Matt. 8:5); rather are they like the unicorn in Job,—they will not obey your voice, or attend at your bidding (Job 39:9). It was said of a famous general of old, when he could have taken the city he warred against, he would not, and by and by when he would, he could not. Beware, lest the same kind of event befall you in the matter of eternal life."¹²

"Let us search our own hearts then, and see how it is with ourselves. Once more let us ask, in the matter of conversion, 'How do we do?'"¹³

"If you are not a son and heir of God, let me entreat you to become one without delay."¹⁴

"Beloved, if you love life, search and see what is your condition. What though you find no tokens for good: better a thousand times to know it now and live, than to know it too late and die eternally!"¹⁵

"Have you entered in at the strait gate or not?... I ask not whether you have heard of it, and believe there is a gate. I ask not whether you have looked at it, and admired it, and hope one day to go in. I ask whether you have gone up to it, knocked at it, been admitted, and are now inside?"¹⁶

V. Consistency

Romans 1:14

"The great aim of all he wrote was to lead readers to respond to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' 'This is the end for which I desire to write and preach; and it is of little use or value to write and preach for anything else.'"¹⁷ — Iain Murray

¹² J. C. Ryle, *Thoughts for Young Men* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 10. *Thoughts for Young Men* was first published as an essay in Ryle's *The Upper Room* in 1888.

¹³ *Practical Religion*, 10.

¹⁴ *Practical Religion*, 398.

¹⁵ *The Christian Race*, 22.

¹⁶ *Practical Religion*, 39.

¹⁷ Quoted in Iain Murray, *J. C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016),