



Thoughts for Young Men

J. C. Ryle



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CLASSICS

THOUGHTS FOR YOUNG MEN

J. C. Ryle



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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Contents

<i>Foreword by Mark Dever</i>	vii
Introduction	1
Part 1: General Reasons for Exhorting Young Men	3
Part 2: Special Dangers to Young Men	19
Part 3: General Counsels for Young Men	37
Part 4: Special Rules for Young Men	55
Conclusion	71

Foreword

J. C. Ryle was a Mr Standfast during the shifting decades of the nineteenth century. As his denomination (the Church of England) was torn by movements to undo the Reformation—some by pulling back to Rome, others by pulling over into increasing unbelief—Ryle stood fast as a proponent of the old paths of biblical Christianity. He was a local pastor for decades, and then spent the last twenty years of his life as the first Bishop of Liverpool. During his long pastoral ministry many of his sermons and addresses were printed in their hundreds of thousands and were widely read to the great benefit of large numbers inside the Church of England and beyond.

Toward the end of his life, Ryle pulled together twenty-one of his ‘sermons, addresses, lectures and tracts’ and published them as *The Upper Room* (1888). He thought that they might survive and do more good bound together in a book than they would if left to fend for themselves. As wise as that decision was, the publisher now thinks that it is time to make at least one more of these addresses available as a separate, inexpensive paperback. As good as the other addresses in *The Upper Room* are, ‘Thoughts for Young Men’ is surely among the first rank in terms of its extraordinary usefulness.

Although delivered more than 130 years ago, ‘Thoughts for Young Men’ is strikingly contemporary. One might think that time changes most those who most reflect its changes. Trends and fads hold sway more tightly among the young. They come out of nowhere. They are taken up by almost everyone. Their rule is absolute—and short. Soon, one fad gives way to the next. What is fashionable among fifteen-year-olds this year will almost certainly not be in five years’ time. With such a tendency to change seemingly built into the DNA of young people, the contemporary feel and timeliness of this nineteenth-century exhortation is all the more striking.

Beginning with Paul’s exhortation to Titus in Titus 2:6 to be ‘sober-minded’, Ryle dispels, reminds, and exhorts. He dispels lies about the temptations young men faced then. And those same lies young men face today. Ryle dispels the myth that young men are strong. Strong bodies too often go with weak wills. He reminds young men that they face a real enemy whom they almost always forget. And, based on all of this, Ryle exhorts as only a seasoned, loving pastor can.

I remember reading this address recently, having not read it for decades, and being struck once again by the timelessness of Ryle’s approach. If I did not know any better I could easily have concluded that it has been written only yesterday!

The body of the address is composed of four sections:

1. Reasons why young men need to be exhorted;
2. Dangers young men face;

3. Counsels (more general principles);
4. 'Special rules' for young men.

Of course, much of this book is as applicable for women as for men, and for the old as for the young; but it has a very special application to young men. I read much of it to several young men in our church recently, and they were surprised at how directly Ryle's counsels applied to their own situations.

Authors guide us through stories, but non-fiction works are best read differently. Ryle does not write to entertain but to instruct. To that end, let me conclude by simply giving the author's argument in outline form. Seeing what is coming next will help you read this book with greater profit, especially if you will humbly and prayerfully prepare your heart beforehand. Here, then, is the outline of the body of Ryle's address:

1. Five Reasons for Exhorting Young Men

- (1) There are few young men who seem to have any religion.
- (2) Death and judgment are before young men, even as others, and they nearly all seem to forget it.
- (3) What young men will be, in all probability depends on what they are now.
- (4) The devil uses special diligence to destroy the souls of young men, and they seem not to know it.
- (5) Young men need exhorting because of the sorrow it will save them, to begin serving God now.

THOUGHTS FOR YOUNG MEN

2. *Five Special Dangers Young Men Need To Be Warned Against*

- (1) Pride.
- (2) The love of pleasure.
- (3) Thoughtlessness and inconsideration.
- (4) Contempt of religion.
- (5) The fear of man's opinion.

3. *Six General Counsels to Young Men*

- (1) Try to get a clear view of the evil of sin.
- (2) Seek to become acquainted with our Lord Jesus Christ.
- (3) Never forget that nothing is as important as your soul.
- (4) Never forget that it is possible to be a young man and to serve God.
- (5) Determine as long as you live to make the Bible your guide and adviser.
- (6) Never make an intimate friend of anyone who is not a friend of God. [Yes, you read that right. Read this section carefully and observe Ryle's wisdom here for our worldly age.]

4. *Five Special Rules for Young Men*

- (1) Resolve at once, by God's help, to break off every known sin, however small.
- (2) Resolve, by God's help, to shun everything which may prove an occasion of sin.
- (3) Resolve never to forget the eye of God is upon you.
- (4) Be diligent in the use of all public means of grace.
- (5) Resolve that wherever you are, you will pray.

Foreword

Reader, I've detained you long enough. Prayerfully and urgently read, consider, and apply to your own life what our departed brother and pastor has to teach us for our own good and for God's greater glory.

MARK DEVER

Washington DC,

August 2015

Introduction

When St Paul wrote his Epistle to Titus about his duty as a minister, he mentioned young men as a class requiring peculiar attention. After speaking of aged men and aged women, and young women, he adds this pithy advice,—‘Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded’ (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 I remember so well as 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 in the right way, and preserve him from faults and sins, which may mar his prospects both for time and eternity, I shall be very thankful.

There are four things which I propose to do:—

1. I will mention some general *reasons* why young men need exhorting.
2. I will notice some special *dangers* against which young men need to be warned.

THOUGHTS FOR YOUNG MEN

3. I will give some general *counsels*, which I entreat young men to receive.

4. 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 God that what I say may do good to some soul.

Part One

General Reasons for Exhorting Young Men

1. In the first place, *What are the general reasons why young men need peculiar 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 have any religion.*

I speak without respect of persons; I say it of all. High or low, rich or poor, gentle or simple, learned or unlearned, in town or in country,—it makes no matter. I tremble to observe how few young men are led by the Spirit,—how few are in that narrow way which leads to life,—how few are setting their affections upon things above,—how few are taking up the cross, and following Christ. I say it with all sorrow, but I believe, as in God's sight, 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 immortal souls? Alas, whatever way we turn for an answer, the report will be one and the same!

Let us ask any faithful minister of the gospel and mark what he will tell us. How many unmarried young people can he reckon up who come to the Lord's Supper? Who are the most backward about means of grace,—the most irregular about Sunday services,—the most difficult to draw to weekly lectures and prayer-meetings,—the most inattentive under preaching at all times? Which part of his congregation fills him with 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 occasion him the greatest uneasiness and sorrow,—who keep him most constantly in fear for their souls, and seem most hopeless? Depend on it, his answer will always be, *'The Young Men.'*

Let us ask the parents in any parish throughout England, and see what they will generally say. Who in their families give them most pain and trouble? Who need the most watchfulness, and most often vex 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 bounds? Who most frequently break out into open sin, disgrace the name they bear, make their friends unhappy, embitter the old age of their relations, and bring down grey hairs with sorrow to the grave? Depend on it, the answer will generally be, *'The Young Men.'*

Let us ask the magistrates and officers of justice, and mark what they will reply. Who go to public-houses and beer-shops

most? Who are the greatest Sabbath-breakers? Who make up riotous mobs and seditious meetings? Who are oftenest taken up for drunkenness, breaches of the peace, fighting, poaching, stealing, assaults, and the like? Who fill the jails, and penitentiaries, and convict ships? Who are the class which requires the most incessant watching and looking after? Depend on it, they will at once point to the same quarter,—they will say, *'The Young Men.'*

Let us turn to the upper classes, and mark the report we shall 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 lives 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. Alas, rank, title, wealth, and education do not prevent these things! Anxious fathers, heart-broken mothers, and sorrowing sisters could tell sad tales about them, if the truth were known. Many a family, with everything this world can give, numbers among its connections 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 has not got some thorn in its side, some blot in its page of happiness, some constant

Thoughts for Young Men is a practical, spiritual, and lively treatment of a vitally important subject—the spiritual formation of godly young men. It is full of sound advice and pastoral wisdom. Ryle's insights into human nature and his clear grasp of gospel principles are as relevant and helpful today as they were when first published in the latter half of nineteenth century.

'[Ryle's writings are] a distillation of true Puritan theology presented in a highly readable and modern form.'

—**Martyn Lloyd-Jones**

'I see [Ryle] as a single-minded Christian communicator of profound biblical, theological, and practical wisdom, a man and minister of giant personal stature and electric force of utterance that sympathetic readers still feel.'

—**J. I. Packer**

J. C. Ryle (1816–1900) was a leading evangelical minister in the Church of England and became the first bishop of Liverpool in 1880. He is most well-known as the author of *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* and *Holiness*.

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