

Holiness by J.C. Ryle

Key Lessons from *Holiness* by J.C. Ryle

1. Holiness is Essential for Every Christian

Ryle begins the book with a strong assertion: “We must be holy, because this is the only sound evidence that we are children of God.” Holiness—becoming more like Christ in character and conduct—is not reserved for a select few “super-Christians” or an optional step in spiritual maturity. It is essential for every believer who walks with Christ. Without holiness, Ryle argues, no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

He stresses that holiness is both evidence of salvation and proof of God’s work in a believer’s life. Being holy does not mean moral perfection, but it does mean striving intentionally to live according to God’s Word, in obedience to His commands, and with a heart set on pleasing Him.

2. Holiness is the Fruit of True Faith

Ryle emphasizes the relationship between justification and sanctification. While Christians are justified—declared righteous before God—solely by faith in Christ, true faith always produces the fruit of holiness. Faith that does not lead to a transformed life is dead (James 2:17). He states, “Faith is the root, and holiness is the fruit.”

The believer is not saved by their own works or holiness, but their sanctification (the lifelong process of becoming holy) is evidence of their justification. Grace, therefore, never negates the call to holy living; instead, it empowers and motivates it.

3. Holiness Requires Striving and Effort

Ryle challenges the idea that sanctification is entirely passive or dependent on waiting for God to act. Instead, he insists that pursuing holiness is an active process that requires discipline, obedience, and effort. Christians must be intentional about resisting sin, engaging with Scripture, persevering in prayer, and practicing self-denial. This aligns with Paul’s words in Philippians 2:12-13: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

Ryle warns against complacency, explaining that spiritual growth comes as believers diligently use the means of grace (like prayer, reading Scripture, attending church, communion, fellowship) and proactively battle sin.

4. The Battle Against Sin is Lifelong

Ryle presents the Christian life as a constant spiritual battle. Even after coming to faith, believers continue to struggle with their sinful nature. Holiness therefore involves repentance for sins, vigilance against temptation, and active dependence on God’s strength. Without effort and watchfulness, sin will rob Christians of their peace, joy, and spiritual progress.

He encourages believers not to grow discouraged by this battle but to recognize that striving against sin is normal and necessary. As Ryle says: “True Christianity is a fight.” Holiness is forged on the battlefield of self-denial, obedience, and spiritual determination.

5. Union with Christ is the Foundation of Holiness

Ryle consistently teaches that believers are only able to become holy because of their union with Christ. He emphasizes that Christ is not only the believer’s righteousness but also their sanctification. Holiness flows from abiding in Christ and relying on His strength, not in attempting to work apart from Him.

He quotes John 15:5: “Apart from Me, you can do nothing.” Through the power of the Holy Spirit, believers become more like Christ as they depend on Him in their daily lives.

6. Grace is Both Forgiveness and Power

Ryle makes it clear that God’s grace is not merely the forgiveness of sin; it is also the power to overcome sin. Grace equips believers to live holy lives by giving them the strength, desire, and ability to obey God. Holiness, therefore, is not achieved through human effort or moral self-improvement alone but through the enabling work of the Holy Spirit.

Ryle’s emphasis on grace empowers believers who may feel discouraged by their struggles with sin. He reminds them that holiness is a process sustained by God’s power, not an unattainable standard they must meet on their own.

7. Practical Holiness: Obedience in Everyday Life

Ryle goes beyond theoretical theology to discuss practical holiness. He explains that holiness affects every part of a Christian’s life—their thoughts, words, actions, relationships, and decisions. It involves living differently from the world, loving others sacrificially, and reflecting Christ in all things.

Holiness is not just an internal attitude but is visible in how believers live. Ryle warns against hypocrisy and self-righteousness, urging Christians to examine their lives and live authentically as followers of Christ.

8. The Role of Suffering in Holiness

Ryle addresses the place of suffering in the Christian life, teaching that trials and hardships are often used by God to refine believers and make them holy. He states: “By affliction He teaches us many precious lessons, which without it we should never learn.”

Suffering deepens dependence on God, purifies motives, and fosters humility. Ryle encourages believers to trust in God’s purposes in suffering and to see it as part of the sanctification process.

9. True Holiness Brings Assurance and Joy

Living a holy life is not burdensome or a joyless task—it provides assurance of salvation, spiritual strength, and a clearer sense of God’s presence. Holy living leads to a life of peace and joy, even amid challenges. Ryle writes, “A holy man will find that he has a solid foundation of comfort in the day of trial.”

Sanctification begins to transform the believer’s experience of life, aligning them with God’s will and filling them with spiritual fruit, including love, joy, and peace (Galatians 5:22-23).

10. The Danger of Neglecting Holiness

Ryle spends significant time warning against the dangers of neglecting holiness. He critiques false teachings that dismiss the need for personal sanctification or suggest that grace eliminates the call to strive for godly living. He calls this error “antinomianism” (the idea that Christians are not bound to God’s moral law).

He stresses that those who live in sustained disobedience or indifference to holiness may not truly belong to Christ. Believers are called to examine themselves and take seriously the command to pursue holiness.

Conclusion

J.C. Ryle’s *Holiness* is a timeless call for Christians to live lives set apart for the glory of God. It reminds believers that holiness is not optional but essential—evidence of saving faith and the work of God’s grace in their lives. Ryle’s teachings emphasize the active pursuit of sanctification, the role of grace, and the importance of abiding in Christ. His practical, convicting, and encouraging insights challenge Christians to strive for spiritual growth and reflect Christ in every aspect of their lives.

The enduring significance of this book lies in its ability to inspire both personal holiness and deeper dependence on God. For modern readers, it serves as a powerful reminder to reject spiritual complacency, to fight sin daily, and to live with the ultimate goal of glorifying God in all things.