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J. C. RYLE ON WORLDLINESS

By David Meager

*“from all the deceits of the **world**, the flesh, and the devil, Good Lord, deliver us.”*¹

In the Spring 2010 issue of *Cross†way* David Phipps wrote an article in appreciation of Bishop J. C. Ryle’s writings. Like David, I have found reading Ryle beneficial and believe that we can learn much from Ryle today and this article will focus on a chapter that particularly stood out for me: *The World*, located in *Practical Religion* published by Banner of Truth. It can also be downloaded in a slightly abridged form from the Internet: www.gracegems.org/Ryle/pr12.htm

Ryle takes the text *“Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord.”* (2 Cor 6 v17, c.f. Revelation 18 v4) and applies this to how the Christian should engage with the world. Some of the phrases and examples Ryle uses may seem quaint or legalistic to modern readers, but I believe many of the applications are still applicable for Christians today. Ryle makes four main points:

- I) *The world is a source of great danger to the soul.*
- II) *What is not meant by separation from the world.*
- III) *What real separation from the world consists in.*
- IV) *The secret of victory over the world.*

Ryle begins by defining what he means by the world. He does not mean of course the physical environment which God has created ‘very good,’ but rather the world in opposition to God, or apart from God: *‘those people who think only, or chiefly, of this world's things, and neglect the world to come,—the people who are always thinking more of earth than of heaven, more of time than of eternity, more of body than the soul, more of pleasing man than of pleasing God. It is of them and their ways, habits, customs, opinions, practices, tastes, aims, spirit, and tone, that I am speaking when I speak of “the world.”’*

I) First, Ryle endeavours to prove how the world is a great danger to the soul. After quoting from the Anglican Liturgy (see quote at top of page), Ryle then cites no less than twenty-one New Testament verses: Rom 12 v2, 1 Cor 2 v12, Gal 1 v4, Eph 2, v2, 2 Tim 4 v10, James 1 v27, James 4 v4, 1 John 2 v15-17, 1 John 3 v1, 1 John 4 v5, 1 John 5 v4, 1 John v 19, Matt 13 v22, John 8 v23, John 14 v17, John 15 v18, John 15 v19, John 16 v33, John 17 v16.

According to Ryle: *‘If any one can read [these verses] carefully, and fail to see that “the world” is an enemy to the Christian's soul, and that there is an utter opposition between the friendship of the world and the friendship of Christ, he is past the reach of argument, and it is a waste of time to reason with him. To my eyes they contain a lesson as clear as the sun at noon day.’*

II) Ryle then makes six points to explain what does not constitute separation from the world. These are largely to do with encouraging Christians not to reject their worldly responsibilities, and it is not hard to see how they apply today:

- i) Not to give up all worldly callings, trades, professions, and business.
- ii) Not to decline all conversation with unconverted people and refuse to go into their society.
- iii) To have other interests apart from Christianity, e.g. science, art, literature, politics etc
- iv) Not to be singular, eccentric, and peculiar in dress, manners, demeanour, and voice.
- v) Not to retire from the company of mankind, and be shut up in solitude.

vi) Not to withdraw from churches where there may be unconverted members.

III) Ryle's third point (about what real separation from the world entails) I believe has the most application for us today. To start with, Ryle admits that this matter is not easy to discern: *'But in what separation [from the world] consists it is not easy to show. On some points it is not hard to lay down particular rules, on others it is impossible to do more than state general principles, and leave every one to apply them according to his position in life. This is what I will attempt to do.'* Ryle then makes six applications:

i) The Christian must refuse to be guided by the world's standard of right and wrong (but rather be guided by the Bible). Here Ryle encourages us to stand apart from the general standards and ways of society if they are in conflict with the Bible. This has particular relevance for us since we are surrounded by multi-media 24hrs of the day and are therefore in constant danger of imbibing worldly values.

ii) The Christian must be very careful how he spends his leisure time. Ryle warns us to be careful about how we use our spare time, in particular he encourages us not to waste our evenings (especially in vain conversation or habitually staying out late etc) but *'to resolve always to make time for quiet, calm thought,—for Bible-reading and prayer... Tell me how a man spends his evenings, and I can generally tell what his character is.'*

iii) The Christian must determine not to be swallowed up and absorbed in the business of the world. Here Ryle encourages us to fulfil our duty in our particular callings, however these should not interfere with our spiritual welfare: *'If he finds his business beginning to eat up his Sundays, his Bible-reading, his private prayer... he will say, "Stand back!" ... He will choose rather to be less rich and prosperous in this world, than not to prosper about his soul.'*

iv) The Christian must abstain from all amusements and recreations which are inseparably connected with sin. Ryle warns his readers to avoid *'amusements which are invariably connected with gambling, betting, drunkenness, and fornication... If we love our souls we must have nothing to do with amusements which are bound up with sin.'* For Ryle in his day this meant warning of the evils of horse racing, bawdy theatre shows, card-playing (for money) and late-night balls etc. For us today this might read: sports primarily associated with gambling, certain types of films/music/computer games (if we play them), night-clubs etc.

v) The Christian must be moderate in the use of lawful and innocent recreations. Here Ryle affirms that recreation is good and needful, especially for the young, and he finds no fault with a moderate use of sport and other pastimes etc. However Ryle warns against the excess of lawful recreation: *'He must not devote his whole heart, soul, and mind, and strength, and time to them, as many do, if he wishes to serve Christ. There are hundreds of lawful things which are good in moderation, but bad when taken in excess.'* For us Ryle's warning is even more applicable due to the increase in leisure time and diversions, many of which did not exist in his day.

vi) The Christian must be careful how he engages in friendships and close relationships with non-Christians. Ryle warns against intimate friendship with unconverted people (Prov 13, v20). This point I was uneasy about and found the most difficult to apply today since friendship with people seems to be one of the most effective ways to communicate the gospel in today's increasingly biblically illiterate culture (unlike Ryle's church-going culture). However, I think we can agree with Ryle that the Christian still needs to be careful here, according to Ryle: *'Human nature is so constituted that we cannot associate with other people without it having an effect on our own character... If friends will not walk in the narrow way with us, we must not walk in the broad way to please them.'*

Ryle concludes the chapter with some constructive advice about how to gain the victory over the world. Firstly we need to be converted i.e. born again, otherwise our tastes and affections will never be for the things of God. Secondly, we should cultivate '*a lively practical faith in unseen things*' i.e. '*to set before our minds every day as grand realities, our souls, God, Christ, heaven, hell, judgment, eternity.*' Thirdly, to attain and cultivate '*the habit of boldly confessing Christ on all proper occasions.*'

In conclusion Ryle reminds us that according to Scripture the world is a danger to the Christian and therefore we should be careful how we engage in it. Ryle does not advocate pietistic withdrawal, but nor does he encourage an uncritical embracing of the world's values and ways. This is a relevant message for evangelicals today since we can often seem little different from the world around us, especially in terms of how we use our spare time. Ryle reminds us that Christians are supposed to be pilgrims in this world and therefore have died to the world (Col 3 v3). We should also remember that the way (and not just the gate) is narrow that leads to life (Mtt 7 v14).

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Endnotes:

- 1) Quoted from *The Litany*, from the *Book of Common Prayer*