

THOUGHTS FOR YOUNG MEN

“Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth.”
(Ecclesiastes 12:1)

“Exhort the young men to be sober-minded.”
(Titus 2:6)

*“Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love,
peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”*
(2 Timothy 2:22)

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PASSING ON THE FAITH

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INTRODUCTION

J.C. Ryle's *Thoughts for Young Men* has become a spiritual classic since it was published in 1865. Though Ryle was speaking to a generation of young men in England during the 19th Century, his counsel is eternally relevant because the same temptations and challenges face young men in the modern day, perhaps in even greater measure. One of the reasons that Ryle's book remains of such enduring value is because his counsel is drawn directly from the pages of Holy Scripture. Ryle's advice is not based upon his own personal opinions, or the dated tastes and values of Victorian society in England. It is based upon God's infallible and unchanging Word.

For this edition of *Thoughts for Young Men*, we have left the original text unchanged and unabridged. To make the book even more useful for fathers disciplining their sons, or for older men disciplining younger men, we have added discussion questions and application exercises at the end of each chapter. While the book can be read individually by young men, it may be even more useful

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for fathers to read the book aloud with their sons, or for older men to work through the book with younger men. Discipleship relationships like these may enable direct follow-up on the questions and applications.

Additionally, footnotes have been added to clarify historical references, and to direct the reader to a portion of Scripture that J.C. Ryle mentions.

We send this edition forth with a prayer that God would continue to bless this wise counsel to the next generation, and that He would raise up a generation of young men who “call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22).

Joshua Schwisow, Editor

July 2024

REASONS FOR EXHORTING YOUNG MEN

When the Apostle Paul wrote his Epistle to Titus about his responsibility as a minister, he mentioned young men as a group requiring particular attention. After speaking of older men and older women, and young women, he adds this advice, “Encourage the young men to be self-controlled” (Tit. 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 that I can remember so well as were 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 walking in the right way, and preserve him from faults and sins, which may hurt his prospects

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both for time and eternity, I shall be very thankful. There are four things which I propose to do:

- I. I will mention some general REASONS why young men need exhorting.
- II. I will note some special DANGERS which young men need to be warned about.
- III. I will give some general COUNSEL which I beg young men to receive.
- IV. 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 to God that what I say may do good to some soul.

I. REASONS FOR EXHORTING YOUNG MEN

What are the general reasons why young men need specific 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 be Christians.

I speak without respect of persons; I say it of all. Rich or poor, gentle or rough, educated or uneducated, in the city or in the country—it makes no difference. I shudder to think how few young men are led by the Spirit, how few are on that narrow road which leads to life, how few are setting their affections on things above, how few are taking up the cross, and following Christ. I say all this with sorrow, but I believe, in God's sight, that 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 souls? Regardless of where we turn for an answer, the report will be one and the same! Let us ask any faithful minister of the gospel, and note what he will tell us. How many unmarried young people can he remember who come to the Lord's Supper? Who are the most backward about the doctrines of salvation, the most irregular about Sunday services, the most difficult to draw to weekly Bible studies and prayer meetings, the most inattentive to whatever is being preached? Which part of his congregation fills him with the 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 cause him the greatest uneasiness and sorrow, who keep him most constantly in fear for their souls, and seem the most hopeless? Depend on it, his answer will always be, "The Young Men!"

Let us ask the parents in any county throughout this land, and see what they will generally say. Who in their families give them the most pain and trouble? Who need the most watchfulness, and most often provoke 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 limits? Who most frequently break out into open sin, disgrace the name they bear, make their friends unhappy, embitter the older relatives, and cause them to die with sorrow in their hearts? Depend on it, the answer will generally be, "The Young Men!"

Let us ask the judges and police officers, and note what they will

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reply. Who goes to the night clubs and bars the most? Who make up street gangs? Who are most often arrested for drunkenness, disturbing the peace, fighting, stealing, assaults, and the like? Who fill the jails, and penitentiaries, and detention homes? Who are the class which requires the most incessant watching and looking after? Depend on it, they will at once point to the same group, they will say, "The Young Men!"

Let us turn to the upper classes, and note the report we will 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 life 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. Note that rank, and title, and wealth, and education, do not prevent these things! Anxious fathers, and heart-broken mothers, and sorrowing sisters, could tell sad stories about them, if the truth were known. Many a family, with everything this world can give, numbers among its relatives 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 hasn't got some thorn in its side, some blot in its page of happiness, some constant source of pain and anxiety; and often, far too often—the true cause is, "The Young Men!"

What shall we say to these things? These are facts, plain facts,

facts which meet us on every side, facts which cannot be denied. How dreadful this is! How dreadful the thought, that every time I meet a young man, I meet one who is in all probability an enemy of God, traveling on the wide road which leads to hell, unfit for heaven! Surely, with such facts before me, will you not wonder that I exhort you, you must allow that there is a good reason.

2.

Death and judgment are waiting for young men, even as it waits for others, and they nearly all seem to forget it.

Young men, it is appointed for you to die; and no matter how strong and healthy you may be now, the day of your death is perhaps very near. I see young people sick as well as the elderly. I bury youthful corpses as well as aged. I read the names of persons no older than yourselves in every graveyard. I learn from books that, excepting infancy and old age, more die between thirteen and twenty-three than at any other period of life. And yet you live as if you were sure that presently you will never die.

Are you thinking you will pay attention to these things tomorrow? Remember the words of Solomon, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1). “I will worry about serious things tomorrow,” said an unsaved person, to one who warned him of coming danger; but his tomorrow never came. Tomorrow is the devil’s day, but today is God’s. Satan does not care how spiritual your intentions are, or how holy your resolutions, if only they are determined to be done tomorrow. Oh, give no place to the devil in this matter! All men

don't live to be elderly fathers, like Isaac and Jacob. Many children die before their fathers. David had to mourn the death of his two finest sons; Job lost all of his ten children in one day. Your lot may be like one of theirs, and when death comes, it will be vain to talk of tomorrow; you must go at once.

Do you think that you will have a more convenient time to think about these things? So thought Felix and the Athenians to whom Paul preached to; but it never came. The road to hell is paved with such ideas. Better make sure to work while you can. Leave nothing unsettled that is eternal. Run no risk when your soul is at stake. Believe me, the salvation of a soul is no easy matter. Every one needs a "Great salvation," whether young or old; all need to be born again—all need to be washed in Christ's blood—all need to be sanctified by the Spirit. Happy is that man who does not leave these things uncertain, but never rests until he has the witness of the Spirit within him, testifying to him that he is a child of God.

Young men, your time is short. Your days are but a brief shadow, a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes, a story that is soon told. Your bodies are not made of brass. "Even the young men," says Isaiah, "stumble and fall" (Isa. 40:30). Your health may be taken from you in a moment: it only needs an accident, a fever, an inflammation, a broken blood vessel, and the worm would soon feed upon you in the grave. There is but a step between any one of you and death. This night your soul might be required of you. You are fast going the way of all the earth, you will soon be gone. Your life is all uncertainty, your death and judgment are perfectly sure. You too must hear the Archangel's trumpet, and go forth to stand before the great white throne of judgment; you too must obey that summons,

which Jerome says was always ringing in his ears: “Get up, you dead, and come to judgment.” “Yes, I am coming soon,” is the language of the Judge Himself. I cannot, dare not, will not let you alone.

Oh that you would all take to heart the words of the Preacher: “Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment” (Eccl. 11:9). Amazing, that with such a prospect of coming judgment, any man can be careless and unconcerned! Surely none are so crazy as those who are content to live unprepared to die. Surely the unbelief of men is the most amazing thing in the world. The clearest prophecy in the Bible begins with these words, “Who has believed our message?” (Isa. 53:1) The Lord Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8) Young men, I fear this be the report of many of you in the courts above: “They will not believe.” I fear you be hurried out of the world, and awake to find out, too late, that death and judgment are realities. I fear all this, and therefore I exhort you.

3.

What young men will be, in all probability depends on what they are now, and they seem to forget this.

Youth is the planting time of full age, the molding season in the little space of human life, the turning point in the history of man’s mind.

By the shoot that springs up we can judge the type of tree that is growing, by the blossoms we judge the kind of fruit, by the

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spring we judge the type of harvest coming, by the morning we judge the coming day, and by the character of the young man, we may generally judge what he will be when he grows up.

Young men, do not be deceived. Don't think you can, at will, serve lusts and pleasures in your beginning, and then go and serve God with ease at your latter end. Don't think that you can live with Esau, and then die with Jacob. It is a mockery to deal with God and your souls in such a fashion. It is an awful mockery to suppose you can give the flower of your strength to the world and the devil, and then put off the King of kings with the scraps and remains of your hearts, the wreck and remnant of your powers. It is an awful mockery, and you may find to your loss that the thing cannot be done.

I dare say you are planning on a late repentance. You do not know what you are doing. You are planning without God. Repentance and faith are the gifts of God, and they are gifts that He often withholds, when they have been long offered in vain. I grant you true repentance is never too late, but I warn you at the same time, late repentance is seldom true. I grant you, one penitent thief was converted in his last hours, that no man might despair; but I warn you, only one was converted, that no man might presume. I grant you it is written, Jesus is "Able to save completely those who come to God through him" (Heb. 7:25). But I warn you, it is also written by the same Spirit, "Since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you" (Prov. 1:24, 26).

Believe me, you will find it no easy matter to turn to God whenever you please. It is a true saying of the godly Leighton, “The way of sin is down hill; a man cannot stop when he wants to.”¹ Holy desires and serious convictions are not like the servants of the Centurion, ready to come and go at your desire; rather they are like the unicorn in Job,² they will not obey your voice, nor attend at your bidding. It was said of the famous general Hannibal³ of old, when he could have taken the city he warred against, he would not, and in time when he would, he could not. Beware lest the same kind of thing happens to you in the matter of eternal life.

Why do I say all this? I say it because of the force of habit. I say it because experience tells me that people’s hearts are seldom changed if they are not changed when young. Seldom indeed are men converted when they are old. Habits have deep roots. Once sin is allowed to settle in your heart, it will not be turned out at your bidding. Custom becomes second nature, and its chains are not easily broken. The prophet has well said, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jer. 13:23). Habits are like stones rolling down hill—the further they roll, the faster and more ungovernable is their course. Habits, like trees, are strengthened by age. A boy may bend an oak when it is a sapling—a hundred men cannot root it up, when it is a full grown tree. A child can

1. A reference to Robert Leighton (1611-1684), a minister in the Scottish Church.

2. See Job 39 in the King James Version; the word “unicorn” was used in the KJV to refer to a “wild ox.”

3. Hannibal, the general of Carthage, who fought the Roman Republic in the Second Punic War (circa 218-201 BC).

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wade over the Thames River⁴ at its fountain-head—the largest ship in the world can float in it when it gets near the sea. So it is with habits: the older, the stronger—the longer they have held possession, the harder they will be to cast out. They grow with our growth, and strengthen with our strength. Custom is the nurse of sin. Every fresh act of sin lessens fear and remorse, hardens our hearts, blunts the edge of our conscience, and increases our evil inclination.

Young men, you may fancy I am laying too much stress on this point. If you had seen old men, as I have, on the brink of the grave, without any feelings, seared, callous, dead, cold, hard as stone—you would not think so. Believe me, you cannot stand still in your souls. Habits of good or evil are daily strengthening in your hearts. Every day you are either getting nearer to God, or further off. Every year that you continue unrepentant, the wall of division between you and heaven becomes higher and thicker, and the gulf to be crossed deeper and broader. Oh, dread the hardening effect of constant lingering in sin! Now is the accepted time. See that your decision not be put off until the winter of your days. If you do not seek the Lord when young, the strength of habit is such that you will probably never seek Him at all.

I fear this, and therefore I exhort you.

4. The Thames River is one of the most significant rivers in England, passing through London, the capital of the United Kingdom.

4.

The devil uses special diligence to destroy the souls of young men, and they don't seem to know it.

Satan knows very well that you will make up the next generation, and therefore he employs every trick to make you his own. I would not have you to be ignorant of his schemes.

You are those on whom he puts his choicest temptations. He spreads his net with the most watchful carefulness, to entangle your hearts. He baits his trap with the sweetest morsels, to get you into his power. He displays his wares before your eyes with his utmost ingenuity, in order to make you buy his sugared poisons, and eat his accursed treats. You are the grand object of his attack. May the Lord rebuke him, and deliver you out of his hands.

Young men, beware of being taken by his snares. He will try to throw dust in your eyes, and prevent you seeing anything in its true colors. He would eagerly make you think that evil is good, and good is evil. He will paint, cover with gold, and dress up sin, in order to make you fall in love with it. He will deform, and misrepresent, and fabricate true Christianity, in order to make you take a dislike to it. He will exalt the pleasures of wickedness—but he will hide from you the sting. He will lift up before your eyes the cross and its painfulness—but he will keep out of sight the eternal crown. He will promise you everything, as he did to Christ, if you will only serve him. He will even help you to wear a form of Christianity, if you will only neglect the power. He will tell you at the beginning of your lives, it is too soon to serve God—he will tell you at the end, it is too late. Oh, do not be deceived!

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You don't know the danger you are in from this enemy; and it is this very ignorance which makes me afraid. You are like blind men, walking among holes and pitfalls; you do not see the perils which are around you on every side.

Your enemy is mighty. He is called "The Prince of this world" (John 14:30). He opposed our Lord Jesus Christ all through His ministry. He tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, and so brought sin and death into the world. He even tempted David, the man after God's own heart, and caused his latter days to be full of sorrow. He even tempted Peter, the chosen Apostle, and made him deny his Lord. Surely his hostility towards man and God is to be despised.

Your enemy is restless. He never sleeps. He is always going around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. He is always going back and forth in the earth, and walking up and down on it. You may be careless about your souls, but he is not. He wants your soul to make you miserable, like himself, and will have your soul if he can. Surely his hatred towards men and God is to be despised.

And your enemy is cunning. For thousands of years he has been reading one book, and that book is the heart of man. He ought to know it well, and he does know it—all its weakness, all its deceitfulness, all its folly. And he has a storehouse full of temptations, such as are most likely to do the heart of man the most harm. Never will you go to the place where he will not find you. Go into the city—he will be there. Go into the wilderness—he will be there also. Sit among drunkards—and he will be there to help you. Listen to preaching—and he will be there to distract

you. Surely such ill-will is to be despised.

Young men, this enemy is working hard for your destruction, however little you may think it. You are the prize for which he is specially contending for. He foresees you must either be the blessings or the curses of your day, and he is trying hard to effect a place in your hearts early in your life, in order that you may help advance his kingdom each day. Well does he understand that to spoil the bud is the surest way to mar the flower.

Oh that your eyes were opened, like those of Elisha's servant in Dothan!⁵ Oh that you could see what Satan is scheming against your peace! I must warn you—I must exhort you. Whether you will hear or not, I cannot, dare not, leave you alone.

5.

Young men need exhorting because of the sorrow it will save them, to begin serving God now.

Sin is the mother of all sorrow, and no sort of sin appears to give a man so much misery and pain as the sins of his youth. The foolish acts he did—the time he wasted—the mistakes he made—the bad company he kept—the harm he did himself, both body and soul—the chances of happiness he threw away—the openings of usefulness he neglected; all these things that often embitter the conscience of an old man, throw a gloom on the evening of his days, and fill later hours of his life with self-reproach and shame.

Some men could tell you of the untimely loss of health, brought on by youthful sins. Disease racks their limbs with pain, and life is

5. See 2 Kings 6.

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almost a weariness. Their muscular strength is so wasted, that the slightest weight seems a burden. Their eye has become prematurely dim, and their natural energy abated. The sun of their health has gone down while it is yet day, and they mourn to see their flesh and body consumed. Believe me, this is a bitter cup to drink.

Others could give you sad accounts of the consequences of idleness. They threw away the golden opportunity for learning. They would not get wisdom at the time when their minds were most able to receive it, and their memory most ready to retain it. And now it is too late. They don't have the time to sit down and learn. They no longer have the same power, even if they had the time. Lost time can never be redeemed. This too is a bitter cup to drink.

Others could tell you of grievous mistakes in judgment, from which they suffer all their lives. They had to have it their own way. They would not take advice. They formed some connection which has been altogether ruinous to their happiness. They chose a profession for which they were entirely unsuited. And they see it all now. But their eyes are only open when the mistake cannot be retrieved. Oh, this is also a bitter cup to drink!

Young men, young men, I wish you did but know the comfort of a conscience not burdened with a long list of youthful sins. These are the wounds that pierce the deepest. These are the arrows that drink up a man's spirit. This is the iron that enters into the soul. Be merciful to yourselves. Seek the Lord early, and so you will be spared many a bitter tear.

This is the truth that Job seems to have felt. He says, "You write down bitter things against me and make me inherit the sins of my youth" (Job 13:26). So also his friend Zophar, speaking of

the wicked, says, “The youthful vigor that fills his bones will lie with him in the dust” (Job 20:11). David also seems to have felt it. He says to the Lord, “Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways” (Ps. 25:7).

Beza, the great Swiss Reformer,⁶ felt it so strongly, that he named it in his will as a special mercy that he had been called out from the world, by the grace of God, at the age of sixteen.

Go and ask believers now, and I think many will tell you much the same. “Oh that I could live my young days over again!” He will most probably say, “Oh that I had spent the beginning of my life in a better way! Oh that I had not laid the foundation of evil habits so strongly in the springtime of my journey!”

Young men, I want to save you all this sorrow, if I can. Hell itself is truth known too late. Be wise in time. What youth sows, old age must reap. Do not give the most precious season of your life to that which will not comfort you in the latter days of your life. Sow to yourselves rather in righteousness: break up your hard ground, don't sow among thorns.

Sin may be easy for you to do with your hands, or run smoothly off your tongue now, but depend on it, the effects of your sin and you will meet again in time, however little you may like it. Old wounds will often ache and give pain long after they are healed, and only a scar remains; so may you find it with your sins. The footprints of animals have been found on the surface of rocks that were once wet sand, thousands of years after the animal that made them has

6. Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Swiss Reformer in Geneva, who succeeded John Calvin in leading the church in Geneva.

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perished and passed away; so also may it be with your sins.

“Experience,” says the proverb, “is a *hard school* to attend, but fools will learn in no other.” I want you all to escape the misery of learning in that school. I want you to avoid the wretchedness that youthful sins are sure to entail. This is the last reason why I exhort you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the condition of young men in the church community? Do we see more young women taking the Christian faith seriously than young men?
2. Do you know anyone who died before age 20? What were the circumstances of their death? What lessons can be drawn about God’s providence from this?
3. Ask yourself these questions. If you were to die tomorrow, is there anything today in your life that needs to be resolved now? Would you die with a significant regret because you did not deal with something of eternal importance today? Have you put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to save you from your sins? Is there a relationship that needs mending? Is there a confession of sin that needs to be made to someone?
4. What are some of your current daily or weekly habits? How long have you been doing those habits? How hard or easy would it be to change those daily habits?

5. Read 1 Peter 5:5-11:

⁵Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.” ⁶Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, ⁷casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. ⁸Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. ⁹Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. ¹⁰But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. ¹¹To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Who does Peter address in verse 5? What does Peter call us to do in verse 6? How does Peter describe Satan in verse 8? If you were at the zoo, and a roaring lion escaped its enclosure, what would you do? What, then, does this mean for how you live the Christian life?

6. Spend time in prayer that the Lord God would bring spiritual reviving to the young men in your community—that young men would know Jesus as their Lord and Savior, love God with their whole heart, and dedicate themselves to serving God in every area of life.