

The Christian Race and Other Sermons (1900)

by
J. C. Ryle

Sermon 4

"REGENERATION" (Part 3)

*"Verily, verily I say unto thee,
Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."
John 3:3*

We have reached the last point in our inquiry about the new Birth--I mean the *marks and evidence* by which it may be known, the notes by which a man may find out whether he has himself been born again or no. To set before you the character of those who are indeed new creatures,--to warn you against certain common mistakes respecting this doctrine,--to wind up the whole subject by appealing to your consciences,--this is the work which I propose to take in hand this morning.

Now this point may be last in order, but it certainly is not least in importance. It is the touchstone of our condition. It decides whether we are natural men or spiritual men, whether we are yet dead in trespasses or have been quickened and brought to see the kingdom of God.

Many there are who take it for granted they have been born again. They do not exactly know why, but it is a sort of thing they never doubted. Others there are who despise all such sifting inquiry. They are sure they are in the right way, they are confident they shall be saved. And as for marks, it is low and legal to talk about them; it is bringing men into bondage. But, beloved, whatever men may say, you may be certain Christ's people are a peculiar people--not only peculiar in their talk but peculiar in their life and conduct, and they may be distinguished from the unconverted around them. You may be certain there are stamps and marks and characters about God's handiwork by which it may always be known; and he who has got no evidences to show may well suspect that he is not in the right way.

Now, about these marks I can of course only speak very shortly and very generally, for time will not allow me to do more. But I would first say one word by way of caution: Remember, then, I would not have you suppose that all children of God do feel alike, or that these marks should be equally strong and plain in every case. The work of grace on man's heart is gradual. First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. It is like leaven; the whole lump is not leavened at once. It is as in the birth of an infant into the world. First it feels, then moves and cries, and sees and hears and knows, and thinks and loves, and walks and talks and acts for itself. Each of these things comes gradually and in order; but we do not wait for all before we say this is a living soul. And just so is every one that is born of the Spirit. He may not, at first, find in himself all the marks of God, but he has the seed of them all about him. And some he knows by experience, and all, in the course of time, shall be known distinctly. But this at least you may be sure of: wherever there is no fruit of the Spirit, there is no work of the Spirit; and if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His. O that this question might stir up every one of you to search and try his

ways! God is not a man that he should lie. He would not have given you the Bible if you could be saved without it. And here is a doctrine on which eternal life depends: "No salvation without the new birth."

I. First, then, and foremost, I would have you write down in your memories a mark which St. John mentions in his first epistle: "Whosoever is born of God, does not commit sin"; whosoever is born of God, sinneth not"; "whosoever abides in Him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth has not seen Him, neither known Him."

Observe, I would not for one minute have you suppose that God's children are perfect, and without spot or stain or defilement in themselves. Do not go away and say I told you they were pure as angels and never made a slip or stumble. The same St. John in the same Epistle declares: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. . . . If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."

But I do say that in the matter of breaking God's commandments, every one that is born again is quite a new man. He no longer takes a light and cool and easy view of sin. He no longer judges of it with the world's judgment. He no longer thinks a little swearing, or a little Sabbath-breaking, or a little fornication, or a little drinking, or a little covetousness small and trifling matters. But he looks on every sort of sin against God or man as exceeding abominable and damnable in the Lord's sight, and, as far as in him lies, he hates it and abhors it, and desires to be quit of it root and branch with his whole heart and mind and soul and strength.

He that is born again has had the eyes of his understanding opened, and the Ten Commandments appear to him in an entirely new light. He feels amazed that he can have lived so long careless and indifferent about transgressions, and he looks back on the days gone by with shame and sorrow and grief. As for his daily conduct, he allows himself in no known sin. He makes no compromise with his old habits and his old principles; he gives them up unsparingly, though it cost him pain, though the world think him over-precise and a fool. But he is a new man and will have nothing more to do with the accursed thing. I do not say but that he comes short and finds his old nature continually opposing him--and this, too, when no eye can see it but his own; but then he mourns and repents bitterly over his own weakness. And this at least he has about him--he is at war, in reality, with the devil and all his works, and strives constantly to be free.

And do you call that no change? Look abroad on this world, this evildoing world. Mark how little men generally think about sin, how seldom they judge of it as the Bible does, how easy they suppose the way to heaven. And judge whether this mark be not exceeding rare. But for all this God will not be mocked, and men may rest assured that until they are convinced of the awful guilt and the awful power and the awful consequences of sin, and, being convinced, flee from it and give it up, they are most certainly not born again.

II. The second mark I would have you note is "faith in Christ," and here again I speak in the words of St. John in his first epistle: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God."

I do not mean by this a general vague sort of belief that Jesus Christ once lived on earth and died--a sort of faith which the very devils possess. I mean, rather, that feeling which comes over a man when he is really convinced of his own guilt and unworthiness, and sees that Christ alone can be his Savior; when he becomes convinced he is in a way to be lost, and must have some

righteousness better than his own, and joyfully embraces that righteousness which Jesus holds out to all who will believe. He that has got this faith discovers a fitness and suitableness and comfort in the doctrine of Christ crucified for sinners which once he never knew. He is no longer ashamed to confess himself by nature poor and blind and naked, and to take Christ for his only hope of salvation.

Before a man is born of the Spirit there seems no particular form nor comeliness about the Redeemer, but after that blessed change has taken place He appears the very chiefest in ten thousand. No honor is so great but Jesus is worthy of it; no love so strong but on Jesus it is well bestowed; no spiritual necessity so great but Jesus can relieve it; no sin so black but Jesus' blood can wash it away. Before the new birth a man can bow at Christ's name and sometimes wonder at Christ's miracles, but that is all. Once born again a man sees a fulness and a completeness and a sufficiency in Christ of things necessary to salvation, so that he feels as if he could never think upon Him enough. To cast the burden of sin on Jesus; to glory in the cross on which He died; to keep continually in sight His blood, His righteousness, His intercession, His mediation; to go continually to Him for peace and forgiveness; to rest entirely on Him for full and free salvation--to make Jesus, in short, all in all in their hopes of heaven--this is the most notable mark of all true children of God--they live by faith in Christ, in Christ their happiness is bound up.

It is the spiritual law of God which brings them to this. Time was when they were ready to think well of themselves; the law strips off their miserable garments of self-righteousness, exposes their exceeding guilt and rottenness, cuts down to the ground their fancied notions of justification by their own works, and so leads them to Christ as their only wisdom and redemption. And then, when they have laid hold on Christ and taken Him for their Saviour, they begin to find that rest which before they had sought in vain.

Such are two first marks of the Spirit's work--a deep conviction of sin and forsaking of it, and a lively faith in Christ crucified as the only hope of forgiveness--marks which the world perhaps may not see, but marks without which no man or woman was ever yet made a new creature. These are the two foundations of the Christian's character, the pillars, as it were, of the kingdom of God. They are hidden roots which others can only judge of by the fruit; but they who have them do generally know it, and can feel the witness in themselves.

III. The third mark of the new birth is "holiness." What says the apostle John again? "Every one that does righteousness is born of God"; "he that is begotten of God keeps himself."

The true children of God delight in making the law their rule of life. It dwells in their minds and is written upon their hearts, and it is their meat and drink to do their Father's will. They know nothing of that spirit of bondage which false Christians complain of. It is their pleasure to glorify God with their bodies and souls, which are His. They hunger and thirst after tempers and dispositions like their Lord's. They do not rest content with sleepy wishing and hoping, but they strive to be holy in all manner of conversation--in thought, in word, and in deed. It is their daily heart's prayer, "Lord what wilt Thou have us to do?" and it is their daily grief and lamentation that they come so short and are such unprofitable servants. Beloved, remember [that] where there is no holiness of life there cannot be much work of the Holy Ghost.

IV. The fourth mark of the new birth is spiritual-mindedness. We learn this from St. Paul's words to the Colossians: "If we then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above . . . set your

affection on things above, not on things on the earth."

He that is born again thinks first about the things which are eternal. He no longer gives up the best of his heart to this perishable world's concerns. He looks on earth as a place of pilgrimage, he looks on heaven as his home. And even as a child remembers with delight its absent parents, and hopes to be one day with them, so does the Christian think of his God and long for that day when he shall stand in His presence and go no more out. He cares not for the pleasures and amusements of the world around him. He minds not the things of the flesh, but the things of the Spirit. He feels that he has a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens, and he earnestly desires to be there. "Lord," he says, "whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none on earth that I desire beside thee."

V. The fifth mark of the new birth is victory over the world. Hear what St. John says: "Whosoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

What is the natural man?--a wretched slave to the opinion of this world. What the world says is right he follows and approves; what the world says is wrong he renounces and condemns also. How shall I do what my neighbors do not do? What will men say of me if I become more strict than they? This is the natural man's argument. But from all this he that is born again is free. He no longer is led by the praise or the blame, the laughter or the frown, of children of Adam like himself. He no longer thinks that the sort of religion which everybody about him professes must necessarily be right. He no longer considers "What will the world say?" but "What does God command?" Oh, it is a glorious change when a man thinks nothing of the difficulty of confessing Christ before men, in the hope that Christ will confess him and own him before the holy angels! That fear of the world is a terrible snare; with many thousands it far outweighs the fear of God. There are men who would care more for the laughter of a company of friends than they would for the testimony of half the Bible. From all this the spiritual man is free. He is no longer like a dead fish floating with the stream of earthly opinion. He is ever pressing upwards, looking unto Jesus in spite of all opposition. He has overcome the world.

VI. The sixth mark of the new birth is "meekness." This is what David meant when he said in Psalm 131: "My soul is even as a weaned child." This is what our Lord has in view when He tells us we "must be converted and become as little children."

Pride is the besetting sin of all natural men, and it comes out in a hundred different fashions. It was pride by which the angels fell and became devils. It is pride which brings many a sinner to the pit; he knows he is in the wrong about religion, but he is too proud to bend his neck and act up to what he knows. It is pride which may always be seen about false professors; they are always saying, We are the men, and we are alone in the right, and ours is the sure way to heaven. And by-and-by they fall and go to their own place and are heard no more of. But he that is born again is clothed with humility. He has a very childlike and contrite and broken spirit. He has a deep sense of his own weakness and sinfulness, and great fear of a fall. You never hear him professing confidence in himself and boasting of his own attainments. He is far more ready to doubt about his own salvation altogether and call himself "chief of sinners." He has no time to find fault with others, or be a busybody about his neighbors. Enough for him to keep up the conflict with his own deceitful heart, the old Adam within. No enemy so bitter to him as his own inbred corruption. Whenever I see a man passing his time in picking holes in other Churches, and talking about

everyone's soul except his own, I always feel in my own mind, "There is no work of the Spirit there." And it is just this humility and sense of weakness which makes God's children men of prayer. They feel their own wants and their danger, and they are constrained to go continually with supplication to Him who has given them the Spirit of adoption, crying, Abba Father, help us and deliver us from evil.

VII. The seventh mark of the new birth is a great delight in all means of grace. This is what Peter speaks of in his first Epistle: "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow." This was the mind of David when he said, "A day in Thy courts is better than a thousand: I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

And oh, what a difference there is between nature and grace in this matter! The natural man has often a form of godliness. He does not neglect the ordinances of religion, but somehow or other the weather, or his health, or the distance contrives to be a great hindrance to him; and far too often it happens that the hours he spends in church or over his Bible are the dullest in his life.

But when a man is born again, he begins to find a reality about means which once he did not feel. The Sabbath no longer seems a dull, wearisome day in which he knows not how to spend his time decently. He now calls it a delight and a privilege, holy of the Lord and honorable. The difficulties which once kept him from God's house now seem to have vanished away. Dinner and weather and the like never detain him at home, and he is no longer glad of an excuse not to go. Sermons appear a thousand times more interesting than they used to do, and he would no more be inattentive or willingly go to sleep under them than a prisoner would upon his trial. And, above all, the Bible looks to him like a new book. Time was when it was very dry reading to his mind. Perhaps it lay in a corner, dusty and seldom read; but now it is searched and examined as the very bread of life. Many are the texts and passages which seem just written for his own case, and many are the days that he feels disposed to say with David, "The law of Thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver."

VIII. The eighth and last mark of the new birth is "love towards others." "Every one," says St. John, "that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love."

He that is born of the Spirit loves his neighbor as himself. He knows nothing of the selfishness and uncharitableness and ill-nature of this world. He loves his neighbor's property as his own. He would not injure it, nor stand by and see it injured. He loves his neighbor's person as his own, and he would count no trouble ill bestowed if he could help or assist him. He loves his neighbor's character as his own, and you will not hear him speak a word against it or allow it to be blackened by falsehoods if he can defend it. And then he loves his neighbor's soul as his own, and he will not suffer him to turn his back on God without endeavoring to stop him by saying, "Oh, do not so!" Oh what a happy place would earth be if there was more love! Oh that men would only believe that the gospel secures the greatest comfort in the life that now is, as well as in the life to come!

And such, beloved, are the marks by which the new birth in a man's soul may generally be discovered. I have been obliged to speak of them very shortly, although each one of them deserves a sermon. I commend to your especial attention the two first: conviction and forsaking of sin, and faith in Christ. They are marks on which each must be his own judge. "Have I ever truly repented? Have I really closed with Christ and taken Him for my only Saviour and Lord?" Let

these questions be uppermost in your mind if you would know whether you are born again or not. The six last marks--viz., holiness, spiritual-mindedness, victory over the world, meekness, delight in means, and love--have this peculiarity about them: that a man's family and neighbors do often see more clearly whether he has got them than he does himself. But they all flow out of the two first, and therefore I once more urge the two first on your especial notice.

And now, brethren beloved, in concluding this course of sermons, I desire to speak one word to the consciences of all who have heard them--old or young, rich or poor, careless or thoughtful--you are all equally concerned.

For three Sunday mornings you have heard this new birth set before you according to my ability, and have you ever thought upon your own state and looked within? What of your own hearts? Are you living or dead, natural or spiritual, born again or not? Are your bodies temples of the Holy Ghost? Are your habits and characters the habits and characters of renewed creatures? Oh, search and see what there is within you. The language of the text is plain--no new birth, no kingdom of God.

I know there is nothing popular or agreeable about this doctrine. It strikes at the root of all compromising half-and-half religion, and still it is true. 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 favor, 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. He died that we might become holy as well as happy. He purchased grace to sanctify as well as grace to redeem. And now forgiveness of sin and change of heart must never be separated--"What God hath joined together, let no man presume to put asunder." The foundation of God stands firm: "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His."

Beloved, it is easy work to live unto ourselves and take no trouble about religion. The world approves it and says we shall probably do well at last; but if ever we are to be saved there is another life, and that too on this side the grave, we must live unto God. It is easy to be natural men. We give no offense, and the devil comforts us by saying, as he did to Eve, "You shall not surely die." But the devil was a liar from the beginning. So long as we are natural men, we are dead already, and we must rise to newness of life. And what do you know of the movements of the Spirit? I ask not so much whether you can say which way He came into your hearts, but I do ask whether you can find any real footsteps or traces or token of His presence--for "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His."

Be not deceived and led away by false opinions. Head-knowledge is not the new birth. A man may know all mysteries like Balaam, and think his eyes are opened, or preach and work miracles and be an Apostle like Judas Iscariot, yet never be born again. Church membership is not the new birth. Many do sit in churches and chapels who shall have no seat in Christ's kingdom; they are not Israel who have the circumcision of the flesh outwardly, they are the true Israel who have the circumcision of the heart, which is inward.¹

¹ *KM note:* I think Ryle is simply making an analogy here based on Rom. 2:28-29, which applies to ethnic Jews, contrasting those who have circumcision only in the flesh to those who are circumcised both in the flesh and in the heart. He does not believe that "the church" is the "True Israel," leaving no future for national Israel. It is quite evident what Ryle believes about national Israel. In his own words, "I believe that the Jews shall ultimately be gathered again as a

There were many Jews in the New Testament days who said, "We have Abraham for our father, and we have the temple among us and that is enough," but Jesus showed them that they only are Abraham's children who have the faith of Abraham and do Abraham's works. And then water-baptism alone is not the new birth. It is the sign and seal, and when used with faith and prayer we have a right to look also for the baptism of the Holy Ghost. But to say that every man who has been baptized has been born again is contrary to Scripture and plain fact. Was not Simon Magus baptized? Yes, but Peter told him after his baptism that he was in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity, his heart not right in the sight of God. "I would not have you ignorant," says Paul to the Corinthians, that all our Fathers were baptised, . . . but with many of them God was not well pleased. "Baptism," writes Peter, "doth indeed save us"; but what baptism? "Not the putting away of the filth of the body, not the washing of water, but the answer of a pure conscience," a conscience made pure by the baptism of the Holy Ghost.

Beloved, let no man lead you astray in this matter. Let no man make you believe that a baptized drunkard or fornicator or blasphemer or worldling has been born of the Spirit. He has not the marks of the new birth, and he cannot have been born again. He is living in sin and carelessness, and St. John has given us his character--"he that committeth sin is of the devil." Remember, the outward seal is nothing without the inward writing on the heart. No evidence can be depended on excepting a new life and a new character and a new creature. And to say that men who want [lack] their evidences are born again is an unreasonable and unscriptural stretch of charity.

And now, in conclusion, if any one of you has reason to think that he still lacks this one thing needful, I entreat that man not to stifle his convictions or nip them in the bud. Do not go away like Cain and silence the voice of conscience by rushing into the vanities of the world; nor dream, like Felix, that you will have a more convenient season than the present. But remember I tell you this day there are two things which make a deathbed specially uncomfortable: first, purposes and promises not performed; and second, convictions slighted and not improved. And if any of you has satisfactory grounds for thinking that he has really tasted something of that saving and necessary change we have considered, I charge that man not to stand still, not to loiter, not to linger, not to look behind him. I warn him that none are in so dangerous a way as those who have become cool and cold and indifferent after real and warm concern about salvation. I urge him to press forward more and more towards the knowledge of Christ, and to remember it is a special mark of God's children that as they grow in age they grow in grace, and feel their sins more deeply and love their Lord and Saviour more sincerely.

separate nation, restored to their own land, and converted to the faith of Christ (Jer. xxx. 10, 11; xxxi. 10; Rom. xi. 25, 26)." See, for example, Sermon 5, "Scattered Israel to be Regathered," from *Coming Events and Present Duties: Being Miscellaneous Sermons on Prophetical Subjects*, posted on our Ryle page, "Miscellaneous Writings."