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# Reality

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J.C. Ryle

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FROM THE INHERITANCE OF OUR FATHERS  
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## JOHN CHARLES RYLE

John Charles Ryle (1816-1900) was educated at Eton and at Christ Church, Oxford where his career was unusually distinguished.

His first serious conviction came soon after he left Eton when his friend, Algernon Coote, rebuked him for swearing. Two years went by. Then in midsummer 1837, not long before his final examinations, he fell ill with severe chest inflammation. "That was the time," he wrote, "when I distinctly remember that I began to read my Bible and pray." He entered church one Sunday after the service had begun. Ephesians 2:8-9 was read and applied to his soul with particular emphasis. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast." In due time, Ryle came to love the doctrines of free grace.

Ryle became curate of Exbury, Hampshire, 1841; rector of St. Thomas, Winchester, 1843; of Helmingham, Suffolk, 1844; vicar of Stradbroke, Suffolk, 1861; rural dean of Hoxne, 1869; honorary canon of Norwich, 1872; select preacher at Cambridge, 1873-74; at Oxford, 1874-76, 1879, 1880; dean designate of Salisbury, 1880; and bishop of Liverpool, 1880-1900.

Ryle marked out a conservative Calvinistic path for evangelical churchmen in days when much of the Church of England was drifting on the tides of liberalism or tractarianism. His successor at Liverpool, F.J. Chavasse, summed him up strikingly: "A man of granite with the heart of a child."

# Reality

*"Reprobate silver."* —Jeremiah 6:30

*"Nothing but leaves."* —Mark 11:13

*"Let us not love in word, neither in tongue;  
but in deed and in truth."* —1 John 3:18

*"Thou hast a name that thou livest,  
and art dead."* —Revelation 3:1

If we profess to have any religion at all, let us take care that it is real. I say it emphatically, and I repeat the saying: Let us mind that our religion is real.

What do I mean when I use the word "real"? I mean that which is genuine, and sincere, and honest, and thorough. I mean that which is not base, and hollow, and formal, and false, and counterfeit, and sham, and nominal. "Real" religion is not mere show, and pretence, and skin-deep feeling, and temporary profession, and outside work. It is something inward, solid, substantial, intrinsic, living, lasting. We know the difference between base coin and

good money—between solid gold and tinsel—between plated metal and silver—between real stone and plaster imitation. Let us think of these things as we consider this subject. What is the character of our religion? Is it real? It may be weak, and feeble, and mingled with many infirmities. That is not the point before us today. Is our religion real? Is it true?

The times in which we live demand attention to this subject. A lack of reality is a striking feature of a vast amount of religion in the present day. Poets have sometimes told us that the world has passed through four different states or conditions. We have had a golden age, and a silver age, a bronze age, and an iron age. How far this is true, I do not stop to inquire. But I fear there is little doubt as to the character of the age in which we live. It is universally an age of base metal and alloy. If we measure the religion of the age by its apparent quantity, there is much of it. But if we measure it by its quality, there is very little indeed. On every side we lack *more reality*.

I ask your attention, while I try to bring home to consciences the subject before us. There are two things which I propose to do:

I. In the first place, I will show the *importance of reality in religion*.

II. In the second place, I will supply *some tests by which we may prove whether our own religion is real*.

Has any reader the least desire to go to heaven when he dies? Do you wish to have a religion which will comfort you in life, give you good hope in death, and abide the judgment of God at the last day? Then, do not turn away from the subject before you. Sit down, and consider calmly, whether your Christianity is real and true, or base and hollow.

I. I have to show the *importance of reality in religion*.

The point is one which, at first sight, may seem to require very few remarks to establish it. All men, I shall be told, are fully convinced of the importance of reality.

But is this true? Can it be said indeed that reality is rightly esteemed among

Christians? I deny it entirely. The greater part of those who profess to admire reality, seem to think that every one possesses it! They tell us "that all have good hearts at bottom"—that all are sincere and true in the main, though they may make mistakes. They call us uncharitable, and harsh, and censorious, if we doubt anybody's goodness of heart. In short, they destroy the value of reality, by regarding it as a thing which almost every one has.

This wide-spread delusion is precisely one of the causes why I take up this subject. I want men to understand that *reality* is a far more rare and uncommon thing than is commonly supposed. I want men to see that *unreality* is one of the great dangers of which Christians ought to beware.

What saith the Scripture? This is the only judge that can try the subject. Let us turn to our Bibles, and examine them fairly, and then deny, if we can, the importance of reality in religion, and the danger of not being real.

(1) Let us look then, for one thing, at the parables spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Observe how many of them are intended to put in strong contrast the true believer and the mere nominal disciple. The parables of the sower, of the wheat and tares, of the draw-net, of the two sons, of the wedding garment, of the ten virgins, of the talents, of the great supper, of the pounds, of the two builders, have all one great point in common. They all bring out in striking colors the difference between reality and unreality in religion. They all show the uselessness and danger of any Christianity which is not real, thorough, and true.

(2) Let us look, for another thing, at the language of our Lord Jesus Christ about the scribes and the Pharisees. Eight times over in one chapter we find Him denouncing them as "hypocrites," in words of almost fearful severity. "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers," He says, "How can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Matt. 23:33.) What may we learn from these tremendously strong expressions? How is it that our gracious and merciful Savior used such cutting words about people

who at any rate were more moral and decent than the publicans and harlots? It is meant to teach us the exceeding abominableness of false profession and mere outward religion in God's sight. Open profligacy and willful obedience to fleshly lusts are no doubt ruinous sins, if not given up. But there seems nothing which is so displeasing to Christ as hypocrisy and unreality.

(3) Let us look, for another thing, at the startling fact, that there is hardly a grace in the character of a true Christian of which you will not find a counterfeit described in the Word of God. There is not a feature in a believer's countenance of which there is not an imitation. Give me your attention, and I will show you this in a few particulars.

Is there not an unreal *repentance*? Beyond doubt there is. Saul and Ahab, and Herod, and Judas Iscariot had many feelings of sorrow about sin. But they never really repented unto salvation.

Is there not an unreal *faith*? Beyond doubt there is. It is written of Simon the



sorcerer, at Samaria, that he “believed,” and yet his heart was not right in the sight of God. It is even written of the devils that they “believe and tremble” (Acts 8:13, 21; James 2:19).

Is there not an unreal *holiness*? Beyond doubt there is. Joash, king of Judah, became to all appearance very holy and good, so long as Jehoiada the priest lived. But as soon as he died the religion of Joash died at the same time (2 Chron. 24:2, 17). Judas Iscariot’s outward life was as correct as that of any of the apostles up to the time he betrayed his Master. There was nothing suspicious about him. Yet in reality he was “a thief” and a traitor (John 12:6).

Is there not an unreal *love and charity*? Beyond doubt there is. There is a love which consists in words and tender expressions, and a great show of affection, and calling other people “dear brethren,” while the heart does not love at all. John says, “Let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” It was not without cause that Paul said: “Let love

be without dissimulation" (1 John 3:18; Rom. 12:19).

Is there not an unreal *humility*? Beyond doubt there is. There is a pretended lowliness of demeanor, which often covers over a very proud heart. Paul warns us against a "voluntary humility," and speaks of "things which had a shew of wisdom in will worship and humility" (Col. 2:18, 23).

Is there not unreal *praying*? Beyond doubt there is. Our Lord denounces it as one of the special sins of the Pharisees—that for a "pretence they make long prayer" (Matt. 23:14). He does not charge them with not praying, or with praying too shortly. Their sin lay in this, that their prayers were not real.

Is there not unreal *worship*? Beyond doubt there is. Our Lord says of the Jews: "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me" (Matt. 15:8). They had plenty of formal services in their temples and their synagogues. But the fatal defect about them was lack of reality and lack of heart.

Is there not unreal *talking* about religion? Beyond doubt there is. Ezekiel describes some professing Jews who talked and spoke like God's people "but their heart goeth after their covetousness" (Ezek. 33:31). Paul tells us that we may "speak with the tongues of men and angels," and yet be no better than sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal (1 Cor. 13:1).

What shall we say to these things? To say the least they ought to set us thinking. To my own mind they seem to lead to only one conclusion. They show clearly the immense importance which Scripture attaches to reality in religion. They show clearly what need we have to take heed lest our Christianity turn out to be merely nominal, formal, unreal, and base.

The subject is of deep importance in every age. There has never been a time, since the church of Christ was founded, when there has not been a vast amount of unreality and mere nominal religion among professing Christians. I am sure it is the case in the present day. Wherever I turn my eyes I see abundant cause for the

warning, "Beware of base metal in religion. Be genuine. Be thorough. Be real. Be true."

How much ritualistic religion is utterly unreal! You will sometimes see men boiling over with zeal about vestments, and gestures, and postures, and church decorations, and daily services, and frequent communions, while their hearts are manifestly in the world. Of the inward work of the Holy Ghost, of living faith in the Lord Jesus, of delight in the Bible and religious conversation, of separation from worldly follies and amusements, of zeal for the conversion of souls to God, of all these things they are profoundly ignorant. And is such Christianity as this real? It is nothing of the kind. It is a mere name.

How much evangelical religion is completely unreal? You will sometimes see men professing great affection for the pure "gospel," while they are practically inflicting on it the greatest injury. They will talk loudly of soundness in the faith, and have a keen nose for heresy. They will run eagerly after popular preachers, and

applaud Protestant speakers at public meetings to the very echo. They are familiar with all the phrases of evangelical religion, and can converse fluently about its leading doctrines. To see their faces at public meetings, or in church, you would think them eminently godly. And yet these people in private will sometimes do things of which even some heathen would be ashamed. They are neither truthful, nor straightforward, nor honest, nor manly, nor just, nor good-tempered, nor unselfish, nor merciful, nor humble, nor kind! And is such Christianity as this real? It is not. It is a miserable imposture, a base cheat and caricature.

How much revivalist religion in the present day is utterly unreal! You will find a crowd of false professors bringing discredit on the work of God wherever the Holy Spirit is poured out. You will see a mixed multitude of Egyptians accompanying the Israel of God, and doing it harm, whenever Israel goes out of Egypt. How many now-a-days will profess to be suddenly convinced of sin, to find peace in

Jesus, to be overwhelmed with joys and ecstasies of soul, while in reality they have no grace at all. Like the stony-ground hearers, they endure but for a season. "In the time of temptation they fall away" (Luke 8:13). As soon as the first excitement is passed off, they return to their old ways, and resume their former sins. Their religion is like Jonah's gourd, which came up in a night and perished in a night. They have neither root nor vitality. They only injure God's cause and give occasion to God's enemies to blaspheme. And is Christianity like this real? It is nothing of the kind. It is base metal from the devil's mint, and is worthless in God's sight.

I write these things with sorrow. I have no desire to bring any section of the church of Christ into contempt. I have no wish to cast any slur on any movement which begins with the Spirit of God. But the times demand very plain speaking about some points in the prevailing Christianity of our day. And one point, I am quite persuaded, that demands attention,

is the abounding lack of reality which is to be seen on every side.

No reader, at any rate, can well deny that this subject before him is of vast importance.

II. I pass on now to the second thing which I propose to do. *I will supply some tests by which we may try the reality of our religion.*

In approaching this part of my subject, I ask every reader of this paper to deal fairly, honestly, and reasonably with his soul. Dismiss from your mind the common idea, that of course all is right if you go to church or to chapel. Cast away such vain notions forever. You must look further, higher, deeper than this, if you would find out the truth. Listen to me, and I will give you a few hints. Believe me, it is no light matter. It is your life.

(1) For one thing, if you would know whether your religion is real, try it by *the place which it occupies* in your inner man. It is not enough that it is in your *head*. You may know the truth, and assent to the

truth, and believe the truth, and yet be wrong in God's sight. It is not enough that it is on your *lips*. You may repeat the creed daily. You may say "Amen" to public prayer in church, and yet have nothing more than an outward religion. It is not enough that it is in your *feelings*. You may weep under preaching one day, and be lifted to the third heaven by joyous excitement another day, and yet be dead to God. Your religion, if it is real, and given by the Holy Ghost, must be in your *heart*. It must occupy the citadel. It must hold the reins. It must sway the affections. It must lead the will. It must direct the tastes. It must influence the choices and decisions. It must fill the deepest, lowest, inmost seat in your soul. Is this your religion? If not, you may well doubt whether it is "*real*" and true (Acts 8:21; Rom. 10:10.)

(2) In the next place, if you would know whether your religion is real, try it by the *feelings towards sin* which it produces. The Christianity which is from the Holy Ghost will always have a very deep view of the sinfulness of sin. It will not merely regard



sin as a blemish and misfortune, which makes men and women objects of pity and compassion. It will see in sin the abominable thing which God hates, the thing which makes man guilty and lost in his Maker's sight, the thing which deserves God's wrath and condemnation. It will look on sin as the cause of all sorrow and unhappiness, of strife and wars, of quarrels and contentions, of sickness and death, the blight which has blighted God's fair creation, the cursed thing which makes the whole earth groan and travail in pain. Above all, it will see in sin the thing which will ruin us eternally, except we can find a ransom; lead us captive, except we can get its chains broken; and destroy our happiness, both here and hereafter, except we fight against it, even unto death. Is this your religion? Are these your feelings about sin? If not, you may well doubt whether your religion is "*real*."

(3) For another thing, if you would know whether your religion is real, try it by the *feelings toward Christ* which it produces. Nominal religion may believe that

such a person as Christ existed, and was a great benefactor to mankind. It may show Him some external respect, attend His outward ordinances, and bow the head at His name. But it will go no further. Real religion will make a man glory in Christ, as the Redeemer, the Deliverer, the Priest, the Friend, without whom he would have no hope at all. It will produce confidence in Him, love towards Him, delight in Him, comfort in Him, as the mediator, the food, the light, the life, the peace of the soul. Is this your religion? Do you know anything of feelings like these toward Jesus Christ? If not, you may well doubt whether your religion is "real."

(4) For another thing, if you would know whether your religion is real, try it by *the fruit it bears in your heart and life*. The Christianity which is from above will always be known by its fruits. It will produce in the man who has it repentance, faith, hope, charity, humility, spirituality, kind temper, self-denial, unselfishness, forgivingness, temperance, truthfulness, brotherly-kindness, patience, forbearance.

The degree in which these various graces appear may vary in different believers. The germ and seeds of them will be found in all who are the children of God. By their fruits they may be known. Is this your religion? If not, you may well doubt whether it is "*real*."

(5) In the last place, if you would know whether your religion is real, try it by *your feelings and habits about means of grace*. Prove it by the Sunday. Is that day a season of weariness and constraint, or a delight and a refreshment, and a sweet foretaste of the rest to come in heaven? Prove it by the public means of grace. What are your feelings about public prayer and public praise, about the public preaching of God's Word, and the administration of the Lord's Supper? Are they things to which you give a cold assent, and tolerate them as proper and correct? Or, are they things in which you take pleasure, and without which you could not live happy? Prove it, finally, by your feelings about private means of grace. Do you find it essential to your com-

fort to read the Bible regularly in private, and to speak to God in prayer? Or, do you find these practices irksome, and either slur them over, or neglect them altogether? These questions deserve your attention. If means of grace, whether public or private, are not as necessary to your soul as meat and drink are to your body, you may well doubt whether your religion is "*real*."

I press on the attention of all my readers the five points which I have just named. There is nothing like coming to particulars about these matters. If you would know whether your religion is "*real*," genuine, and true, measure it by the five particulars which I have now named. Measure it fairly; test it honestly. If your heart is right in the sight of God, you have no cause to flinch from examination. If it is wrong, the sooner you find it out the better.

And now I have done what I proposed to do. I have shown from Scripture the unspeakable importance of reality in religion, and the danger in which many stand

of being lost forever, for absence of it. I have given five plain tests, by which a man may find out whether his Christianity is real. I will conclude all by a direct application of the whole subject to the souls of all. I will draw my bow at a venture, and trust that God will bring an arrow home to the hearts and consciences of many.

(1) My first word of application shall be *an inquiry*. Is your own religion real or unreal, genuine or base? I do not ask what you think about others. Perhaps you may see many hypocrites around you. You may be able to point to many who have no "reality" at all. This is not the question. You may be right in your opinion about others. But I want to know about yourself. Is your own Christianity real and true, or nominal and base?

If you love life, do not turn away from the question which is now before you. The time must come when the whole truth will be known. The judgment day will reveal every man's religion, of what sort it is. The parable of the wedding garment will

receive an awful fulfilment. Surely it is a thousand times better to find out *now* your condition, and to repent, than to find it out too late in the next world, when there will be no space for repentance. If you have common prudence, sense, and judgment, consider what I say. Sit down quietly this day, and examine yourself. Find out the real character of your religion. With the Bible in your hand, and honesty in your heart, the thing may be known. Then resolve to find out.

(2) My second word of application shall be a *warning*. I address it to all who know, in their own consciences, that their religion is not real. I ask them to remember the greatness of their danger, and their exceeding guilt in the sight of God.

An unreal Christianity is specially offensive to that great God with whom we have to do. He is continually spoken of in Scripture as the God of Truth. Truth is peculiarly one of His attributes. Can you doubt for a moment that He abhors everything that is not genuine and true? Better, I firmly believe, to be found an ignorant

heathen at the last day, than to be found with nothing better than a nominal religion. If your religion is of this sort, beware!

An unreal Christianity is sure to fail a man at last. It will wear out; it will break down; it will leave its possessor like a wreck on a sandbank, high and dry and forsaken by the tide; it will supply no comfort in the hour when comfort is most needed, in the time of affliction, and on the bed of death. If you want a religion to be of any use to your soul, beware of unreality! If you would not be comfortless in death, and hopeless in the judgment day, be genuine, be real, be true.

(3) My third word of application shall be *advice*. I offer it to all who feel pricked in conscience by the subject of this address. I advise them to cease from all trifling and playing with religion, and to become honest, thorough-going, whole-hearted followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Apply without delay to the Lord Jesus, and ask Him to become your Savior, your Physician, your Priest, and your Friend. Let not the thought of your unworthiness

keep you away; let not the recollection of your sins prevent your application. Never, never forget that Christ can cleanse you from any quantity of sins, if you only commit your soul to Him. But one thing He does ask of those who come to Him: He asks them to be real, honest, and true.

Let reality be one great mark of your approach to Christ, and there is everything to give you hope. Your repentance may be feeble, but let it be real; your faith may be weak, but let it be real; your desires after holiness may be mingled with much infirmity, but let them be real. Let there be nothing of reserve, of double-dealing, of part-acting or dishonesty, of sham, of counterfeit, in your Christianity. Never be content to wear a cloak of religion. Be all that you profess. Though you may err, be real. Though you may stumble, be true. Keep this principle continually before your eyes, and it will be well with your soul throughout your journey from grace to glory.

(4) My last word of application shall be *encouragement*. I address it to all who have



manfully taken up the cross, and are honestly following Christ. I exhort them to persevere, and not to be moved by difficulties and opposition.

You may often find few with you, and many against you. You may often hear hard things said of you. You may often be told that you go too far, and that you are extreme. Heed it not. Turn a deaf ear to remarks of this kind. Press on.

If there is anything which a man ought to do thoroughly, really, truly, honestly, and with all his heart, it is the business of his soul. If there is any work which he ought never to slur over, and do in a slovenly fashion, it is the great work of working out his own salvation (Phil. 2:12). Believer in Christ, remember this! Whatever you do in religion, do it well. Be real. Be thorough. Be honest. Be true.

If there is anything in the world of which a man need not be ashamed, it is the service of Jesus Christ. Of sin, of worldliness, of levity, of trifling, of time-wasting, of pleasure-seeking, of bad temper, of pride, of making an idol of money,

dress, dancing, hunting, shooting, card-playing, novel-reading, and the like, of all this a man may well be ashamed. Living after this fashion he makes the angels sorrow, and the devils rejoice. But of living for his soul, caring for his soul, thinking of his soul, providing for his soul, making his soul's salvation the principal and chief thing in his daily life, of all this a man has no cause to be ashamed at all. Believer in Christ, remember this! Remember it in your Bible-reading and your private praying. Remember it on your Sabbaths. Remember it in your worship of God. In all these things never be ashamed of being whole-hearted, real, thorough, and true.

The years of our life are fast passing away. Who knows but this year may be the last in his life? Who can tell but that he may be called this very year to meet his God? As ever you would be found ready, be a real and true Christian. Do not be base metal.

The time is fast coming when nothing but reality will stand the fire. Real repentance towards God, real faith towards our

Lord Jesus Christ, real holiness of heart and life, these, these are the things which will alone pass current at the last day. It is a solemn saying of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: Depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:22-23).

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