

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.”

The Best Friend

This is my friend.

—SONG OF SOLOMON 5:16

A friend is one of the greatest blessings on earth. Tell me not of money: affection is better than gold; sympathy is better than lands. He is the poor man who has no friends. This world is full of sorrow because it is full of sin. It is a dark place. It is a lonely place. It is a disappointing place. The brightest sunbeam in it is a friend. Friendship halves our troubles and doubles our joys.

A real friend is scarce and rare. There are many who will eat, drink, and laugh with us in the sunshine of prosperity. There are few who will stand by us in the days of darkness—few who will love us when we are sick, helpless, and poor—few, above all, who will care for our souls.

Does any reader of this want a real friend? I write to recommend one to your notice this day. I know of One “that sticketh closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24). I know

of One who is ready to be your friend for time and for eternity, if you will receive Him. Hear me, while I try to tell you something about Him.

The friend I want you to know is Jesus Christ. Happy is that family in which Christ has the foremost place! Happy is that person whose chief friend is Christ!

I. *Do we want a friend in need? Such a friend is the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Man is the neediest creature on God's earth because he is a sinner. There is no need so great as that of sinners; poverty, hunger, thirst, cold, sickness, all are nothing in comparison. Sinners need pardon, and they are utterly unable to provide it for themselves; they need deliverance from a guilty conscience and the fear of death, and they have no power of their own to obtain it. This need the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to relieve. "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

We are all by nature poor dying creatures.

From the king on his throne to the pauper in the workhouse, we are all sick of a mortal disease of soul. Whether we know it or not, whether we feel it or not, we are all dying daily. The plague of sin is in our blood. We cannot cure ourselves: we are hourly getting worse and worse. All this the Lord Jesus undertook to remedy. He came into the world “to bring it health and cure”; He came to deliver us from “the second death”; He “abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (Jer. 33:6; Rev. 2:11; 2 Tim. 1:10).

We are all by nature imprisoned debtors. We owed our God ten thousand talents and had nothing to pay. We were wretched bankrupts, without hope of discharging ourselves. We could never have freed ourselves from our load of liabilities and were daily getting more deeply involved. All this the Lord Jesus saw and undertook to remedy. He engaged to ransom and redeem us; He came “to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to

them that are bound"; He came to redeem us "from the curse of the law" (Hos. 13:14; Isa. 61:1; Gal. 3:13).

We were all by nature shipwrecked and cast away. We could never have reached the harbor of everlasting life. We were sinking in the midst of the waves, shiftless, hopeless, helpless, and powerless; tied and bound by the chain of our sins, floundering under the burden of our own guilt, and likely to become a prey to the devil. All this the Lord Jesus saw and undertook to remedy. He came down from heaven to be our mighty helper; He came to "seek and to save that which was lost"; and to "deliver [us] from going down into the pit" (Luke 19:10; Job 33:24).

Could we have been saved without the Lord Jesus Christ coming down from heaven? It would have been impossible, so far as our eyes can see. The wisest men of Egypt and Greece and Rome never found out the way to peace with God. Without

the friendship of Christ we should all have been lost for evermore in hell.

Was the Lord Jesus Christ obliged to come down to save us? Oh, no! It was His own free love, mercy, and pity that brought Him down. He came unsought and unasked because He was gracious.

Let us think on these things. Search all history from the beginning of the world. Look round the whole circle of those you know and love: you never heard of such friendship among the sons of men. There never was such a real friend in need as Jesus Christ.

II. Do you want *a friend in deed*? Such a friend is the Lord Jesus Christ.

The true extent of a man's friendship must be measured by his deeds. Tell me not what he says, feels, and wishes; tell me not of his words and letters; tell me rather what he does. "Friendly is that friendly does."

The doings of the Lord Jesus Christ for man are the grand proof of His friendly

feeling towards him. Never were there such acts of kindness and self-denial as those which He has performed on our behalf. He has not loved us in word only but in deed.

For our sakes, He took our nature upon Him and was born of a woman. He who was very God and equal with the Father laid aside for a season His glory and took upon Him flesh and blood like our own. The almighty Creator of all things became a little babe like any of us, and experienced all our bodily weaknesses and infirmities, sin only excepted. “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

For our sakes, He lived thirty-three years in this evil world, despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. Though He was King of kings He had nowhere to lay His head; though He was Lord of lords, He was often weary, hungry, thirsty, and poor. He “took upon him the form of a servant,” and “humbled himself” (Phil. 2:7–8).

For our sakes, He suffered the most painful of all deaths, even the death of the cross. Though innocent, and without fault, He allowed Himself to be condemned and found guilty. He who was the Prince of Life was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and poured out His soul unto death. He “died for us” (1 Thess. 5:10).

Was He obliged to do this? Oh, no! He might have summoned to His help more than twelve legions of angels, and scattered His enemies with a word. He suffered voluntarily and of His own free will to make atonement for our sins. He knew that nothing but the sacrifice of His body and blood could ever make peace between sinful man and a holy God. He laid down His life to pay the price of our redemption: He died that we might live; He suffered that we might reign; He bore shame that we might receive glory. He “suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.” He was made “sin for us, who knew no sin;

that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (1 Peter 3:18; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Such friendship as this passes man's understanding. Friends who would die for those who love them, we may have heard of sometimes. But who can find a man who would lay down his life for those that hate him? Yet this is what Jesus has done for us. "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Ask all the tribes of mankind, from one end of the world to the other, and you will nowhere hear of a deed like this. None was ever so high and stooped down so low as Jesus the Son of God: none ever gave so costly a proof of his friendship; none ever paid so much and endured so much to do good to others. Never was there such a friend in deed as Jesus Christ!

III. Do we want a mighty and powerful friend? Such a friend is Jesus Christ.

Power to help is that which few possess

in this world. Many have will enough to do good to others, but no power. They feel for the sorrows of others and would gladly relieve them if they could; they can weep with their friends in affliction but are unable to take their grief away. But though man is weak, Christ is strong—though the best of our earthly friends is feeble, Christ is almighty: “All power is given unto me in heaven and earth” (Matt. 28:18). No one can do so much for those whom he befriends as Jesus Christ. Others can befriend their bodies a little; He can befriend both body and soul. Others can do a little for them in time; He can be a friend both for time and eternity.

(a) He is *able to pardon* and save the very chief of sinners. He can deliver the most guilty conscience from all its burdens and give it perfect peace with God. He can wash away the vilest stains of wickedness and make a man whiter than snow in the sight of God. He can clothe a poor weak child of Adam in everlasting righteousness and give him a title to heaven that can never be over-

thrown. In a word, He can give any one of us peace, hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God, if we will only trust in Him. "The blood of Jesus Christ...cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

(b) He is *able to convert* the hardest of hearts and create in man a new spirit. He can take the most thoughtless and ungodly people and give them another mind by the Holy Ghost which He puts in them. He can cause old things to pass away and all things to become new. He can make them love the things which they once hated, and hate the things which they once loved. He can give them "power to become the sons of God." "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature" (John 1:12; 2 Cor. 5:17).

(c) He is *able to preserve* to the end all who believe in Him and become His disciples. He can give them grace to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil, and fight a good fight at the last. He can lead them on safely in spite of every temptation, carry them home through a thousand dangers,

and keep them faithful, though they stand alone and have none to help them. "He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him" (Heb. 7:25).

(d) He is *able to give* those that love Him the best of gifts. He can give them in life inward comforts, which money can never buy—peace in poverty, joy in sorrow, and patience in suffering. He can give them in death bright hopes, which enable them to walk through the dark valley without fear. He can give them after death a crown of glory which fadeth not away, and a reward compared to which the Queen of England has nothing to bestow.

This is power indeed: this is true greatness; this is real strength. Go and look at the poor Hindu idolater seeking peace in vain by afflicting his body and, after fifty years of self-imposed suffering, unable to find it. Go and look at the benighted Catholic, giving money to his priest to pray for his soul, and yet dying without comfort. Go and look at rich men, spending thousands in search

of happiness, and yet always discontented and unhappy. Then turn to Jesus and think what He can do and is daily doing for all who trust Him. Think how He heals all the brokenhearted, comforts all the sick, cheers all the poor that trust in Him, and supplies all their daily need. The fear of man is strong, the opposition of this evil world is mighty, the lusts of the flesh rage horribly, the fear of death is terrible, the devil is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour; but Jesus is stronger than them all. Jesus can make us conquerors over all these foes. And then say whether it is not true, that there never was so mighty a friend as Jesus Christ.

IV. Do we want *a loving and affectionate friend?* Such a friend is Jesus Christ.

Kindness is the very essence of true friendship. Money and advice and help lose half their grace, if not given in a loving manner. What kind of love is that of the Lord Jesus toward man? It is called, a love that “passeth knowledge” (Eph. 3:19).

Love shines forth in His *reception of sinners*. He refuses none that come to Him for salvation, however unworthy they may be. Though their lives may have been most wicked, though their sins may be more in number than the stars of heaven, the Lord Jesus is ready to receive them and give them pardon and peace. There is no end to His compassion; there are no bounds to His pity. He is not ashamed to befriend those whom the world casts off as hopeless. There are none too bad, too filthy, and too much diseased with sin, to be admitted into His home. He is willing to be the friend of any sinner; He has kindness and mercy and healing medicine for all. He has long proclaimed this to be His rule: "him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

Love shines forth in His *dealings with sinners*, after they have believed in Him and become His friends. He is very patient with them, though their conduct is often very trying and provoking. He is never tired of hearing their complaints, however often

they may come to Him. He sympathizes deeply in all their sorrows. He knows what pain is; He is “acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). In all their afflictions He is afflicted. He never allows them to be tempted above what they are able to bear; He supplies them with daily grace for their daily conflict. Their poor services are acceptable to Him; He is as well pleased with them as a parent is with his child’s endeavors to speak and walk. He has caused it to be written in His book, that He “taketh pleasure in his people,” and that He “taketh pleasure in them that fear him” (Pss. 149:4; 147:11).

There is no love on earth that can be named together with this! We love those in whom we see something that deserves our affection, or those who are our bone or our flesh; but the Lord Jesus loves sinners in whom there is no good thing. We love those from whom we get some return for our affection; but the Lord Jesus loves those who can do little or nothing for Him, compared to what He does for them. We love where

we can give some reason for loving; but the great Friend of sinners draws His reasons out of His own everlasting compassion. His love is purely disinterested, purely unselfish, purely free. Never, never was there so truly loving a friend as Jesus Christ.

V. Do we want *a wise and prudent friend?* Such a friend is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Man's friendship is sadly blind. He often injures those he loves by injudicious kindness: he often errs in the counsel he gives; he often leads his friends into trouble by bad advice, even when he means to help them. He sometimes keeps them back from the way of life, and entangles them in the vanities of the world, when they have nearly escaped. The friendship of the Lord Jesus is not so: it always does us good, and never evil.

The Lord Jesus *never spoils* His friends by extravagant indulgence. He gives them everything that is really for their benefit; He withholds nothing from them that is really

good; but He requires them to take up their cross daily and follow Him. He bids them endure hardships as good soldiers: He calls on them to fight the good fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil. His people often dislike it at the time, and think it hard; but when they reach heaven they will see it was all well done.

The Lord Jesus *makes no mistakes* in managing His friends' affairs. He orders all their concerns with perfect wisdom: all things happen to them at the right time and in the right way. He gives them as much of sickness and as much of health as much of poverty and as much of riches—as much of sorrow and as much of joy as He sees their souls require. He leads them by the right way to bring them to the city of habitation. He mixes their bitterest cups like a wise physician, and takes care that they have not a drop too little or too much. His people often misunderstand His dealings; they are silly enough to fancy their course of life might have been better ordered, but

in the resurrection ay they will thank God that not their will, but Christ's was done.

Look around the world and see the harm which people are continually getting from their friends. Mark how much more ready men are to encourage one another in worldliness and levity, than to provoke to love and good works. Think how often they meet together, not for the better, but for the worse—not to quicken one another's souls in the way to heaven, but to confirm one another in the love of this present world. Alas, there are thousands who are wounded unexpectedly in the house of their friends!

And then turn to the great Friend of sinners, and see how different a thing is His friendship from that of man. Listen to Him as He walks by the way with His disciples; mark how He comforts, reproves, and exhorts with perfect wisdom. Observe how He times His visits to those He loves as to Mary and Martha at Bethany. Hear how He converses, as He dines on the shore of the Sea of Galilee: "Simon, son of Jonas,

lovest thou me?" (John 21:16). His company is always sanctifying. His gifts are always for our soul's good; His kindness is always wise; His fellowship is always to edification. One day of the Son of Man is better than a thousand in the society of earthly friends; one hour spent in private communion with Him is better than a year in kings' palaces. Never, never was there such a wise friend as Jesus Christ.

VI. Do we want a tried and proved friend? Such a friend is Jesus Christ.

Six thousand years have passed away since the Lord Jesus began His work of befriending mankind. During that long period of time He has had many friends in this world. Millions on millions, unhappily, have refused His offers and been miserably lost forever; but thousands on thousands have enjoyed the mighty privilege of His friendship and been saved. He has had great experience.

- He has had friends of *every rank and sta-*

tion in life. Some of them were kings and rich men, like David and Solomon and Hezekiah and Job; some of them were very poor in this world, like the shepherds of Bethlehem, James, John, and Andrew; but they were all alike Christ's friends.

- He has had friends *of every age* that man can pass through. Some of them never knew Him until they were advanced in years, like Manasseh, Zacchaeus, and probably the Ethiopian eunuch. Some of them were His friends even from their earliest childhood, like Joseph and Samuel and Josiah and Timothy. But they were all alike Christ's friends.
- He has had friends *of every possible temperament and disposition*. Some of them were simple plain men, like Isaac; some of them were mighty in word and deed, like Moses; some of them were fervent and warm-hearted, like Peter; some of them were gentle and retiring spirits, like John; some of them were active and stirring, like Martha; some of them loved to sit quietly at

His feet, like Mary; some dwelt unknown among their own people, like the Shunamite; some have gone everywhere and turned the world upside down, like Paul. But they were all alike Christ's friends.

- He has had friends *of every condition in life*. Some of them were married and had sons and daughters, like Enoch; some of them lived and died unmarried, like Daniel and John the Baptist; some of them were often sick, like Lazarus and Epaphroditus; some of them were strong to labor, like Persis, Tryphena, and Tryphosa; some of them were masters, like Abraham and Cornelius; some of them were servants, like the saints in Nero's household; some of them had bad servants, like Elisha; some of them had bad masters, like Obadiah; some of them had bad wives and children, like David. But they were all alike Christ's friends.

- He has friends *of almost every nation, and people, and tongue*. He has had friends in hot countries and in cold; friends among

nations highly civilized, and friends among the simplest and rudest tribes. His book of life contains the names of Greeks and Romans, of Jews and Egyptians, of bond and of free. There are to be found on its lists reserved Englishmen and cautious Scotchmen, impulsive Irishmen and fiery Welshmen, volatile Frenchmen and dignified Spaniards, refined Italians and solid Germans, rude Africans and refined Hindus, cultivated Chinese and half-savage New Zealanders. But they were all alike Christ's friends.

All these have made trial of Christ's friendship and proved it to be good. They all found nothing wanting when they began; they all found nothing wanting as they went on. No lack, no defect, no deficiency was ever found by any one of them in Jesus Christ. Each found his own soul's wants fully supplied; each found every day that in Christ there was enough and to spare. Never, never was there a friend so fully tried and proved as Jesus Christ.

VII. Last, but not least, do we want *an unfailing friend?* Such a friend is the Lord Jesus Christ.

The saddest part of all the good things of earth is their instability. Riches make themselves wings and flee away; youth and beauty are but for a few years; strength of body soon decays; mind and intellect are soon exhausted. All is perishing. All is fading. All is passing away. But there is one splendid exception to this general rule, and that is the friendship of Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus is *a friend who never changes*. There is no fickleness about Him: those whom He loves, He loves unto the end. Husbands have been known to forsake their wives; parents have been known to cast off their children; human vows and promises of faithfulness have often been forgotten. Thousands have been neglected in their poverty and old age who were honored by all when they were rich and young. But Christ never changed His feelings towards one of His friends. He is “the

same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Heb. 13:8).

The Lord Jesus *never goes away from His friends*. There is never a parting and good-bye between Him and His people. From the time that He makes His abode in the sinner's heart, He abides in it forever. The world is full of leave-takings and departures: death and the lapse of time break up the most united family, sons go forth to make their way in life, daughters marry and leave their father's house forever. Scattering, scattering, scattering is the yearly history of the happiest home. How many we have tearfully watched as they drove away from our doors, whose pleasant faces we have never seen again! How many we have sorrowfully followed to the grave, and then come back to a cold, silent, lonely, and blank fireside! But, thanks be to God, there is One who never leaves His friends! The Lord Jesus is He who has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5).

The Lord Jesus *goes with His friends*

wherever they go. There is no possible separation between Him and those whom He loves. There is no place or position on earth or under the earth that can divide them from the great Friend of their souls. When the path of duty calls them far away from home, He is their companion; when they pass through the fire and water of fierce tribulation, He is with them; when they lie down on the bed of sickness, He stands by them and makes all their trouble work for good; when they go down the valley of the shadow of death and friends and relatives stand still and can go no further, He goes down by their side. When they wake up in the unknown world of Paradise, they are still with Him; when they rise with a new body at the Judgment Day, they will not be alone. He will own them for His friends, and say, "They are mine: deliver them and let them go free." He will make good His own words: "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20).

Look around the world and see how fail-

ure is written on all men's schemes. Count up the partings, separations, disappointments, and bereavements which have happened under your own knowledge. Think what a privilege it is that there is One at least who never fails, and in whom no one was ever disappointed! Never, never was there so unfailing a friend as Jesus Christ.

Practical Applications

And now, suffer me to conclude with a few plain words of application. I know not who you are or in what state your soul may be; but I am sure that the words I am about to say deserve your serious attention. Oh, that you may not be found heedless of spiritual things! Oh, that you may be able to give a few thoughts to Christ!

- Know then, for one thing, that I call upon you to *consider solemnly whether Christ is your Friend and you are His.* There are thousands on thousands, I grieve to say, who are not Christ's friends. Baptized in His name, outward members of His church, attendants

on His means of grace—all this they are, no doubt. But they are not Christ's *friends*. Do they hate the sins which Jesus died to put away? No. Do they love the Savior who came into the world to save them? No. Do they care for the souls which were so precious in His sight? No. Do they delight in the word of reconciliation? No. Do they try to speak with the Friend of sinners in prayer? No. Do they seek close fellowship with Him? No. Oh, reader, is this your case? How is it with you? Are you or are you not one of Christ's friends?

•Know, in the next place, that *if you are not one of Christ's friends, you are a poor, miserable being*. I write this down deliberately. I do not say it without thought. I say that if Christ be not your friend, you are a poor, miserable being.

You are in the midst of a failing, sorrowful world, and you have no real source of comfort or refuge for a time of need. You are a dying creature, but you are not ready to die. You have sins, and they are not for-

given. You are going to be judged, and you are not prepared to meet God: you could be, but you refuse to use the one only Mediator and Advocate. You love the world better than Christ. You refuse the great Friend of sinners, and you have no friend in heaven to plead your cause. Yes, it is sadly true! You are a poor, miserable being. It matters nothing what your income is: without Christ's friendship you are very poor.

- Know, in the third place, that *if you really want a friend, Christ is willing to become your friend*. He has long wanted you to join His people, and He now invites you by my hand. He is ready to receive you, all unworthy as you may feel, and to write your name down in the list of His friends. He is ready to pardon all the past, to clothe you with righteousness, to give you His Spirit, to make you His own dear child. All He asks you to do is to come to Him.

He bids you come with all your sins, only acknowledging your vileness and confessing that you are ashamed. Just as you

are—waiting for nothing—unworthy of anything in yourself—Jesus bids you come and be His friend. Oh, come and be wise! Come and be safe. Come and be happy. Come and be Christ's friend.

- Know, in the last place, that *if Christ is your friend, you have great privileges, and ought to walk worthy of them*. Seek every day to have closer communion with Him who is your Friend, and to know more of His grace and power. True Christianity is not merely the believing a certain set of dry, abstract propositions: it is to live in daily personal communication with an actual living person—Jesus the Son of God. “To me,” said Paul, “to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21).

Seek every day to glorify your Lord and Savior in all your ways. “A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly” (Prov. 18:24), and no man surely is under such mighty obligations as the friend of Christ. Avoid everything which would grieve your Lord. Fight hard against besetting sins, against inconsistency, against back-

wardness to confess Him before men. Say to your soul, whenever you are tempted to that which is wrong, "Soul, is this your kindness to your Friend?"

Think, above all, of the mercy which has been shown you and learn to rejoice daily in your Friend! What if your body be bowed down with disease? What if your poverty and trials be very great? What if your earthly friends forsake you and you are alone in the world? All this may be true; but if you are in Christ, you have a Friend, a mighty Friend, a loving Friend, a wise Friend, a Friend that never fails. Oh, think, think much upon your Friend!

Yet a little time and your Friend shall come to take you home, and you will dwell with Him forever. Yet a little time and you will see as you have been seen, and know as you have been known. And then you shall hear assembled worlds confess, that *he is the rich and happy man who has had Christ for his friend.*