

J.C. Ryle:

II. DANGERS OF YOUNG MEN

There are some special dangers that young men need to be warned against.

(1) One danger to young men is PRIDE.

I know well that all souls are in fearful peril. Old or young, it doesn't matter; all have a race to run, a battle to fight, a heart to humble, a world to overcome, a body to keep under control, a devil to resist; and we may very well say, Who is sufficient for these things? But still every age and condition has its own peculiar snares and temptations, and it is well to know them. He that is forewarned is forearmed. If I can only persuade you to be on your guard against the dangers I am going to name, I am sure I shall do your souls an essential service.

Pride is the oldest sin in the world. Indeed, it was before the world. Satan and his angels fell by pride. They were not satisfied with their first situation and status. Thus pride stocked hell with its first inhabitants.

Pride threw Adam out of paradise. He was not content with the place God assigned him. He tried to raise himself, and fell. Thus sin, sorrow, and death entered in by pride.

Pride sits in all our hearts by nature. We are born proud. Pride makes us rest content with ourselves--think we are good enough as we are--keep us from taking advice--refuse the gospel of Christ--turn every one to his own way. But pride never reigns anywhere so powerfully as in the heart of a young man.

How common is it to see young men with big heads, high-minded, and impatient of any counsel! How often they are rude and uncourteous to all around them, thinking they are not valued and honored as they deserve! How often will they not stop to listen to a hint from an older person! They think that they know everything. They are full of conceit of their own wisdom. They think elderly people, and especially their relatives, are stupid, and dull, and slow. They want no teaching or instruction themselves: they understand all things. It almost makes them angry to be spoken to. Like young horses, they cannot bear the least control. They must be independent and have their own way. They seem to think, like those whom Job mentioned, "You are the people, and wisdom will die with you" (Job 12:2). And all this is pride.

Rehoboam was such a person, who despised the counsel of the old experienced men who stood before his father, and listened to the advice of the young men of his own generation. He lived to reap the consequences of his folly. There are many like him.

The prodigal son in the parable was also such a person, who needed to have his share of the inheritance so he could set himself up in the lifestyle that he desired. He could not submit to live quietly under his father's roof, but would go into a far country, and be his own master. Like the little child that will leave its mother's hand and walk alone, he soon feels the sting for his folly. He became wiser when he had to eat husks with the swine. But there are many like him.

Young men, I beseech you earnestly, beware of pride. Two things are said to be very rare sights in the world--one is a young man that is humble, and the other is an old man that is content. I fear that this is only too true.

Do not be proud of your own abilities, your own strength, your own knowledge, your own appearance, your own cleverness. Do not be proud of yourself, and your endowments of any kind. It all comes from not knowing yourself and the world. The older you grow, and the more you see, the less reason you will find for being proud. Ignorance and inexperience are the pedestal of pride; once the pedestal is removed--pride will soon come down.

Remember how often Scripture sets before us the excellence of a humble spirit. How strongly we are warned "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought" (Romans 12:3). How plainly we are told, "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know!" (1 Corinthians 8:2). How strict is the command, "Clothe yourselves with humility" (Colossians 3:12). And again, "Clothe yourselves with humility" (1 Peter 5:5). This is the garment of which many seem not to have so much as a rag.

Think of the great example our Lord Jesus Christ leaves us in this respect. He washed the feet of His disciples, saying, "You should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15). It is written, "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9). And again, "He made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself" (Philippians 2:7, 8). Surely to be proud is to be more like the devil and fallen Adam, than like Christ.

Think of the wisest man that ever lived--I mean Solomon. See how he speaks of himself as a "little child," as one who "does not know how to carry out his duties" or manage for himself (1 Kings 3:7). That was a very different spirit from his brother Absalom's, who thought himself equal to anything: "If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that he gets justice" (2 Samuel 15:4). That was a very different spirit from his brother Adonijah's, who "exalted himself, saying, I will be king" (1 Kings 1:5). Humility was the beginning of Solomon's wisdom. He writes it down as his own experience, "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Proverbs 26:12).

Young men, take to heart the Scriptures just quoted. Do not be too confident in your own judgment. Stop being so sure that you are always right, and others wrong. Don't trust your own opinion, when you find it contrary to that of older men, and especially to that of your own parents. Age gives experience, and therefore deserves respect. It is a mark of Elihu's wisdom, in the book of Job, that "Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he" (Job 32:4). And afterwards he said, "I am young in years, and you are old; that is why I was fearful, not daring to tell you what I know. I thought, 'Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom'" (Job 32:6-7). Humility and silence are beautiful graces in young people. Never be ashamed of being a learner: Jesus was one at twelve years; when He was found in the temple, He was "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (Luke 2:46). The wisest men would tell you they are always learners, and are humbled to find after all how little they know. The great Sir Isaac Newton used to say that he felt himself no better than a little child, who had picked up a few precious stones on the shore of the sea of knowledge.

Young men, if you would be wise, if you would be happy, remember the warning I give you--Beware of pride.

(2) Another danger to young men is the LOVE OF PLEASURE.

Youth is the time when our passions are strongest--and like unruly children, cry most loudly for indulgence. Youth is the time when we have generally our most health and strength: death seems far away, and to enjoy ourselves in this life seems to be everything. Youth is the time when most people have few earthly cares or anxieties to take up their attention. And all these things help to make young men think of nothing except pleasure. "I serve lusts and pleasures:" that is the true answer many a young man should give, if asked, "Whose Servant are you?"

Young men, time would not permit me to tell you all the fruits this love of pleasure produces, and all the ways in which it may do you harm. Why should I speak of carousing, partying, drinking, gambling, movie-going, dancing, and the like? There are few to be found who don't know something of these things by bitter experience. And these are only instances. All things that give a feeling of excitement for the time--all things that drown thought, and keep the mind in a constant whirl--all things that please the senses and delight the flesh--these are the sort of things that have mighty power at your time of life, and they owe their power to the love of pleasure. Be on your guard. Do not be like those of whom Paul speaks, "Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4).

Remember what I say: if you would cling to earthly pleasures--these are the things which murder souls. There is no surer way to get a seared conscience and a hard heart towards the things of God, than to give way to the desires of the flesh and mind. It seems like nothing at first, but it tells in the long run.

Consider what Peter says: "Abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). They destroy the soul's peace, break down its strength, lead it into captivity, and make it a slave.

Consider what Paul says: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed" (Colossians 3:5). "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24). Once the body was a perfect home for a soul--now it is all corrupt and disordered, and needs constant watching. It is a burden to the soul--not a helper; a

hindrance--not an assistance. It may become a useful servant, but it is always a bad master.

Consider, again, the words of Paul: "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Romans 13:14). "These," says Leighton, "are the words, the very reading of which gave Augustine a great conviction of heart, causing an immoral young man to be turned into a faithful servant of Jesus Christ." Young men, I wish this might be the case with all of you.

Remember, again, if you cling to earthly pleasures, they will all be unsatisfying, empty, and pointless. Like the locusts of the vision in Revelation, they seem to have crowns on their heads: but like the same locusts, you will find they have stings--real stings--in their tails. All that glitters is not gold. All that tastes sweet is not good. All that pleases for a while is not real pleasure.

Go and take your fill of earthly pleasures if you will--you will never find your heart satisfied with them. There will always be a voice within, crying, like the leech in Proverbs 30:15, "Give! Give!" There is an empty place there, which nothing but God can fill. You will find, as Solomon did by experience, that earthly pleasures are but a meaningless show--promising contentment but bringing a dissatisfaction of spirit--gold plated caskets, exquisite to look at on the outside, but full of ashes and corruption within. Be wise in your youth. Write the word "poison" on all earthly pleasures. The most lawful of them must be used in moderation. All of them are soul-destroying if you give them your heart. Pleasure, must first have the guarantee that it is not sinful--then it is to be enjoyed in moderation.

And I will not shrink from warning all young men to remember the seventh commandment; to beware of adultery and sexual immorality, of all impurity of every kind. I fear that we don't very often speak on this part of God's law. But when I see how prophets and Apostles have dealt with this subject, when I observe the open way in which the Reformers of our own Church denounced it, when I see the number of young men who walk in the wicked footsteps of Reuben, and Hophni, and Phinehas, and Amnon, I for one cannot, with a good conscience, hold my peace. The world becomes more wicked because of our failure to teach and preach on this commandment. For my own part, I feel it would be false and unscriptural delicacy, in addressing men, not to speak of that which is preeminently the "young man's sin."

The violation of the seventh commandment is the sin above all others, that, as Hosea says, "takes away the understanding" (Hosea 4:11). It is the sin that leaves deeper scars upon the soul than any other sin that a man can commit. It is a sin that destroys thousands of young men in every age, and has even overthrown a few of the saints of God in the past. Samson and David are fearful proofs. It is the sin that man dares to smile at, and smoothes over using the terms: thrills, love, uncontrollable passions, and natural desires. But it is the sin that the devil rejoices over, for he is the "unclean spirit;" and it is the sin that God abhors, and declares He "will judge" (Hebrews 13:4).

Young men, "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18) if you love life. "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient" (Ephesians 5:6). Flee from the opportunity of it--from the company of those who might draw you into it--from the places where you might be tempted to do it. Read what our Lord says about it in Matthew 5:28, "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Be like the holy servant Job: "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1). Flee from talking about it. It is one of the things that ought not even be hinted about in conversation. You cannot even touch black grease without getting your hands dirty. Flee from the thoughts of it; resist them, destroy them, pray against them--make any sacrifice rather than give way to them. Imagination is the hotbed where this sin is too often hatched. Guard your thoughts, and there will be little fear about your actions.

Consider the caution I have been giving. If you forget everything else, do not let this be forgotten.

(3) Another danger to young men is THOUGHTLESSNESS.

Not thinking is one simple reason why thousands of souls are thrown away forever into the Lake of Fire. Men will not consider, will not look ahead, will not look around them, will not reflect on the end of their present course, and the sure consequences of their present days, and wake up to find they are damned for a lack of thinking.

Young men, none are in more danger of this than yourselves. You know little of the perils around you, and so you are careless how you walk. You hate the trouble of serious, quiet thinking, and so you make wrong

decisions and bring upon yourselves much sorrow. Young Esau had to have his brother's stew and sold his birthright: he never thought how much he would want it in the future. Young Simeon and Levi had to avenge the rape of their sister Dinah, and kill the Shechemites: they never considered how much trouble and anxiety they might bring on their father Jacob and his house. Job seems to have been especially afraid of this thoughtlessness among his children: it is written, that when they had a feast, and the "period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' This was Job's regular custom" (Job 1:5).

Believe me, this world is not a world in which we can do well without thinking, and least of all do well in the matter of our souls. "Don't think," whispers Satan: he knows that an unconverted heart is like a dishonest businessman's financial records, they will not bear close inspection. "Consider your ways," says the Word of God--stop and think--consider and be wise. The Spanish proverb says it well, "Hurry comes from the devil." Just as men marry in a rush and then are miserable with their mate, so they make mistakes about their souls in a minute, and then suffer for it for years. Just as a bad servant does wrong, and then says, "I never gave it a thought," so young men run into sin, and then say, "I did not think about it--it did not look like sin." Not look like sin! What would you expect? Sin will not come to you, saying, "I am sin;" it would do little harm if it did. Sin always seems "good, and pleasant, and desirable," at the time of commission. Oh, get wisdom, get discretion! Remember the words of Solomon: "Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm" (Proverbs 4:26).

Some, I dare say, will object that I am asking what is unreasonable; that youth is not the time of life when people ought to be grave and thoughtful. I answer, there is little danger of their being too much so in the present day. Foolish talking and kidding, and joking, and excessive amusement, are only too common. I don't argue the fact that there is a time for all things; but to be always flippant and joking is anything but wise. What does the wisest of men say--"It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure" (Ecclesiastes 7:2-4). Matthew Henry tells a story of a great statesman in Queen Elizabeth's time, who retired from public life in his latter days, and gave himself up to serious thought. His former merry companions came to visit him, and told him that he was becoming somber: "No," he replied, "I am serious; for everyone around me is serious. God is serious in observing us--Christ is serious in interceding for us--the Spirit is serious in striving with us--the truths of God are serious--our spiritual enemies are serious in their endeavors to ruin us--poor lost sinners are serious in hell--and why then should you and I not be serious too?"

Oh, young men, learn to be thoughtful! Learn to consider what you are doing, and where you are going. Make time for calm reflection. Commune with your own heart, and be still. Remember my caution--Do not be lost merely for the lack of thought.

(4) Another danger to young men is CONTEMPT OF CHRISTIANITY.

This also is one of your special dangers. I always observe that none pay so little outward respect to Christianity as young men. None take so little part in our services, when they are present at them--use Bibles so little--sing so little--listen to preaching so little. None are so generally absent at prayer meetings, Bible Studies, and all other weekday helps to the soul. Young men seem to think they do not need these things--they may be good for women and old men, but not for them. They appear ashamed of seeming to care about their souls: one would almost fancy they considered it a disgrace to go to heaven at all. And this is contempt of Christianity--it is the same spirit which made the young people of Bethel mock Elisha--and of this spirit I say to all young men, Beware! If it is worthwhile to be a Christian, it is worthwhile to be in earnest about it.

Contempt of holy things is the straight road to hell. Once a man begins to make a joke of any part of Christianity, then I am never surprised to hear that he has turned out to be an unbeliever.

Young men, have you really made up your minds to this? Have you clearly looked into the fires which are before you, if you persist in despising Christianity? Call to mind the words of David: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1). The fool, and no one but the fool has said it: but he has never proved it! Remember, if there ever was a book which has been proved true from beginning to end, by every kind of evidence, that book is the Bible. It has defied the attacks of all enemies and faultfinders. "The Word of the Lord is flawless" (Psalm 18:30). It has been tested in every way, and the more it has been tested, the more evidently has it been shown to be the very handiwork of God Himself. What will you believe, if you do not believe the

Bible? There is no choice but to believe something ridiculous and absurd. Depend on it, no man is so grossly naive as the man who denies the Bible to be the Word of God; and if it be the Word of God, be careful that you don't despise it.

Men may tell you that there are difficulties in the Bible; things hard to understand. It would not be God's book if there were not. And what if there are? You don't despise medicines because you cannot explain all that your doctor does with them. But whatever men may say, the things needed for salvation are as clear as daylight. Be very sure of this--people never reject the Bible because they cannot understand it. They understand it too well; they understand that it condemns their own behavior; they understand that it witnesses against their own sins, and summons them to judgment. They try to believe it is false and useless, because they don't like to believe it is true. An evil lifestyle must always raise an objection to this book. Men question the truth of Christianity because they hate the practice of it.

Young men, when did God ever fail to keep His word? Never. What He has said, He has always done; and what He has spoken, He has always made good. Did He fail to keep His word at the flood? No. Did He fail with Sodom and Gomorrah? No. Did He fail with unbelieving Jerusalem? No. Has He failed with the Jews up to this very hour? No. He has never failed to fulfill His word. Take care, lest you be found among those who despise God's Word.

Never laugh at Christianity. Never make a joke of sacred things. Never mock those who are serious and earnest about their souls. The time may come when you will count those happy whom you laughed at--a time when your laughter will be turned into sorrow, and your mockery into seriousness.

(5) Another danger to young men is the FEAR OF MAN'S OPINION.

"The fear of man" will indeed "prove to be a snare" (Proverbs 29:25). It is terrible to observe the power which it has over most minds, and especially over the minds of the young. Few seem to have any opinions of their own, or to think for themselves. Like dead fish, they go with the stream and tide: what others think is right, they think is right; and what others call wrong, they call wrong too. There are not many original thinkers in the world. Most men are like sheep, they follow a leader. If it was the fashion of the day to be Roman Catholics, they would be Roman Catholics, if it was to be Islamic, they would be Islamic. They dread the idea of going against the current of the times. In a word, the opinion of the day becomes their religion, their creed, their Bible, and their God.

The thought, "What will my friends say or think of me?" nips many a good inclination in the bud. The fear of being looked at, laughed at, ridiculed, prevents many a good habit from being taken up. There are Bibles that would be read this very day, if the owners dared. They know they ought to read them, but they are afraid: "What will people say?" There are knees that would be bent in prayer this very night, but the fear of man forbids it: "What would my wife, my brother, my friend, my companion say, if they saw me praying?" Oh, what wretched slavery this is, and yet how common! "I was afraid of the people and so I gave into them," Saul said to Samuel, "and so he violated the Lord's command" (1 Samuel 15:24). "I am afraid of the Jews," said Zedekiah, the graceless king of Judah: and so he disobeyed the advice which Jeremiah gave him (Jeremiah 38:19). Herod was afraid of what his guests would think of him: so he did that which made him "greatly distressed," he beheaded John the Baptist. Pilate feared offending the Jews: so he did that which he knew in his conscience was unjust--he delivered up Jesus to be crucified. If this is not slavery, what is?

Young men, I want you all to be free from this bondage. I want each of you to care nothing about man's opinion, when the path of duty is clear. Believe me, it is a great thing to be able to say "No!" Here was good King Jehoshaphat's weak point--he was too easy and yielding in his dealings with Ahab, and therefore caused many of his troubles (1 Kings 22:4). Learn to say "No!" Don't let the fear of not seeming good-natured make you unable to do it. When sinners entice you, be able to say decidedly, "I will not give in to them" (Proverbs 1:10).

Consider how unreasonable this fear of man is. How short lived is man's hostility, and how little harm he can do you! "Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men, who are but grass, that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth?" (Isaiah 51:12-13). And how thankless is this fear! No one will really think better of you for it. The world always respects those the most, who act boldly for God. Oh, break these bonds, and cast these chains from you! Never be ashamed of letting men see that you want to go to heaven. Do not think it a disgrace to show that you are a servant of God. Never be afraid of doing what is right.

Remember the words of the Lord Jesus: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Dangers of Young Men

Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Try only to please God, and He will soon make others pleased with you. "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7). Young men, be of good courage. Don't worry what the world says or thinks: you will not always be with the world. Can man save your soul? No. Will man be your judge in the great and dreadful day of judgment? No. Can man give you a good conscience in this life, a good hope in death, a good answer in the morning of resurrection? No! no! no! Man can do nothing of the sort. Then "Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool" (Isaiah 51:7-8). Call to mind the saying of Gardiner: "I fear God, and therefore I have no one else to fear." Go and be like him.

Such are the warnings I give you. Take them to heart. They are worth thinking about. I am greatly mistaken if they are not greatly needed. The Lord grant that they have not been given to you in vain.