

Formal Religion

J.C. Ryle, 1878

(From Practical Religion)

"Having a form of godliness — but denying the power thereof." 2 Timothy 3:5

"A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God." Romans 2:28-29

READER,

The texts which head this page deserves your serious attention at any time. I take it for granted that you have *some religion*. You are not an infidel. You profess and call yourself a Christian. Well, is your Christianity *formal* — or *spiritual*? Is religion with you a matter of form — or a matter of the heart? Is it form — or heart?

The question deserves especial notice in this age of the church and world. Never since the Lord Jesus Christ left the earth, was there so much formality and false profession, as there is at the present day. Now, if ever, we ought to examine ourselves, and search our religion, that we may know of what sort it is. Reader, let us find out whether our Christianity is a thing of form — or a thing of heart.

I know no better way of unfolding the subject than by turning to a plain passage of the Word of God. Let us hear what the apostle Paul says about it. He lays down the following great principles in his Epistle to the Romans: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the

Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God." Three most instructive lessons appear to me to stand out on the face of that passage. Let us see what they are.

I. We learn, firstly, that *formal religion is not true religion*; and a formal Christian is not a true Christian in God's sight.

II. We learn, secondly, that *the heart is the seat of true religion*, and that the true Christian is the Christian in heart.

III. We learn, thirdly, that true religion must never expect to be *popular*. It will not have the "praise of man — but of God."

Let us thoroughly consider these great principles. Two hundred years have passed away since a mighty Puritan divine said, "Formality, formality, formality, is the great sin of England at this day, under which the land groans. There is more *light* than there was — but less life; more *shadow* — but less substance; more *profession* — but less holiness." (Thomas Hall, 1658). What would this good man have said if he had lived in our times?

I. We learn, first, that formal religion is not true religion, and a formal Christian is not a true Christian in God's sight.

What do I mean when I speak of formal religion? This is a point that must be made clear. Thousands, I suspect, know nothing about it. Without a distinct understanding of this point, my whole paper will be useless. My first step shall be to paint, describe, and define. When a man is a Christian in *name only* — and not in reality; in *outward* things only — and not in his inward feelings; in profession only — and not in practice; when his Christianity, in short, is a mere matter of form, or fashion, or custom, without any influence on his heart or life — in such a case as this, the man has what I call a "formal religion." He possesses indeed the *form*, or *husk*, or *skin* of religion — but he does not possess its *substance* or its *power*.

Look, for example, at those thousands of people whose whole religion seems to consist in keeping religious ceremonies and ordinances. They attend regularly on public worship. They go regularly to the Lord's table. But they never get any further. They know nothing of *experimental* Christianity. They are not familiar with the Scriptures — and take no delight in reading them. They do not separate themselves from the ways of the world. They draw no distinction between godliness and ungodliness in their friendships, or matrimonial alliances. They care little or nothing about the distinctive doctrines of the Gospel. They appear utterly indifferent as to what they hear preached. You may be in their company for weeks, and for anything you may hear or see — you might suppose they were infidels! What can be said about these people? They are Christians undoubted, by *profession*; and yet there is neither heart nor life in their Christianity. There is but one thing to be said about them: They are formal Christians — their religion is a *mere form!*

Look in another direction, at those hundreds of people whose whole religion seems to consist in *talk* and *high profession*. They know the *theory* of the Gospel with their heads, and profess to delight in Evangelical doctrine. They can say much about the "soundness" of their own views, and the "darkness" of all who disagree with them; but they never get any further! When you examine their inner *lives* — you find that they know nothing of *practical godliness*. They are neither truthful, nor charitable, nor humble, nor honest, nor kind-tempered, nor unselfish, nor honorable. What shall we say of these people? They are Christians, no doubt, in *name* — and yet there is neither *substance* nor *fruit* in their Christianity. There is but one thing to be said: They are *formal Christians* — their religion is an *empty form!*

Such, reader, is the formal religion against which I wish to warn you this day. Here is the point about which I offer you a question. Here is a *rock* on which myriads on every side are making miserable shipwreck of their souls. One of the wickedest things that Machiavel ever said was this, "Religion itself should not be cared for — but only the *appearance* of it." Such notions, reader, are of the earth, earthy. Nay,

rather, they are from beneath; they smell of the pit. Beware of them, and stand upon your guard. *If there is anything about which the Scripture speaks expressly — it is the sin and uselessness of formality!*

Hear what Paul tells the Romans: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one *outwardly*, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code." These are strong words indeed! A man might be a son of Abraham according to the flesh, a member of one of the twelve tribes, circumcised the eighth day, a keeper of all the feasts, a regular worshiper in the temple — and yet in God's sight, not be a Jew!

Just so, a man may be a Christian by outward profession — a member of a Christian Church — baptized with Christian baptism — an attendant on Christian ordinances — and yet, in God's sight, not a Christian at all!

Hear what the prophet Isaiah says: "The multitude of your sacrifices — what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations — I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts — my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Take your evil deeds out of my sight!" (Isaiah 1:11-15)

These words, when duly weighed, are very extraordinary. The sacrifices which are here declared to be useless were appointed by God Himself. The feasts and ordinances which God says He "hates," had been prescribed by Himself! God Himself pronounces His own institutions to be useless — when they are used formally and without heart in the worshiper. In fact they are worse than useless; they are even offensive

and hurtful. Words cannot be imagined more distinct and unmistakable. They show that *formal religion is worthless* in God's sight. It is not worth calling religion!

Hear, lastly, what our Lord Jesus Christ says. We find Him saying of the Jews of His day, "This people draws near unto Me with their mouth, and honors Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me. In vain do they worship Me!" (Matthew 15:8, 9). We see Him repeatedly denouncing the formalism and hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees, and warning His disciples against it. Eight times in one chapter (Matthew 23) He says to them, "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, *hypocrites!*"

For sinners of the worst description He always had a word of kindness, and held out to them an open door. But formalism, He would have us know, is a desperate disease, and must be exposed in the severest language. To the eye of the ignorant man, a formalist may seem to have a very decent quantity of religion, though not perhaps of the best quality. In the eye of Christ, however, the case is very different. In His sight, formality is no religion at all.

Reader, what shall we say to these testimonies of Scripture? It would be easy to add to them. They do not stand alone. If words mean anything, they are a clear warning to all who *profess* and *call* themselves Christians. They teach you plainly that as you dread *sin* and avoid sin — so you ought to dread *formality* and avoid formality. *Formalism* may take your hand with a smile, and look like a brother — while *sin* comes against you with sword drawn, and strikes at you like an open enemy. But both have one end in view. Both want to ruin your soul; and, of the two, formalism is far the most likely to do it! Reader, if you love life, beware of *formality* in religion.

Nothing is so **common**. It is one of the great *family diseases* of the whole race of mankind. It is *born* with us, *grows* with us, and is never completely cast out of us until we die. It meets us in church — and it meets us in chapel. It meets us among rich — and it meets us among poor. It meets us among learned people — and it meets us among

unlearned. It meets us among Romanists — and it meets us among Protestants. It meets us among High Churchmen — and it meets us among Low Churchmen. It meets us among Evangelicals — and it meets us among Tractarians. Go wherever we will, and join whatever Church we may — we are never beyond the risk of its infection! We shall find it among Quakers and Plymouth Brethren, as well as at Rome. The man who thinks that there is no formal religion in his own camp, at any rate, is a very blind and ignorant person! Reader, if you love life, *beware of formality!*

Nothing is so **dangerous** to a man's own soul. Familiarity with the form of religion, while we neglect its reality — has a fearfully deadening effect on the conscience. It brings up by degrees a thick crust of *insensibility* over the whole inner man. None seem to become so desperately hard, as those who are continually repeating holy words and handling holy things, while their hearts are running after sin and the world. Landlords who only go to church formally, to set an example to their tenants; masters who have family prayers formally, to keep up a good appearance in their households; unconverted clergymen, who are every week reading prayers and lessons of Scripture in which they feel no real interest; unconverted clerks, who are constantly reading responses and saying "Amen," without feeling what they say; unconverted singers, who sing the most spiritual hymns every Sunday, merely because they have good voices, while their affections are entirely on things below — all, all, all are in solemn danger! They are gradually *hardening* their hearts, and *searing* the skin of their consciences. Reader, if you love your own soul, *beware of formality!*

Nothing, finally, is so **foolish, senseless, and unreasonable**. Can a formal Christian really suppose that the mere *outward* Christianity he professes, will comfort him in the day of sickness and the hour of death? The thing is impossible. A *painted fire* cannot warm, and a *painted banquet* cannot satisfy hunger — and a *formal religion* cannot bring peace to the soul.

Can he suppose that *God* does not see the heartlessness and deadness of his Christianity? Though he may deceive neighbors, acquaintances, fellow-worshippers, and ministers with a *form of godliness*, does he think that he can deceive God? The very idea is absurd. He who formed the eye — shall He not see? He knows the very secrets of the heart. He will judge the secrets of men at the last day. He who said to each angel of the seven churches, "I know your works," is not changed. He who said to the man without the wedding garment, "Friend, how did you get in here?" will not be deceived by a *little cloak of outward religion*. Reader, if you would not be put to shame at the last day, once more I say, *beware of formality!*

II. I pass on to the second thing which I proposed to consider. The heart is the seat of true religion — and the true Christian is the Christian in heart.

The heart is the real test of a man's **character**. It is not what he *says* or what he *does*, by which the man may be always known. He may say and do things that are right from false and unworthy motives — while his heart is altogether wrong. The *heart* is the man! "As he thinks in his heart — so is he" (Proverbs 23:7).

The heart is the right test of a man's **religion**. It is not enough that a man holds a correct creed of doctrine, and maintains a proper outward form of godliness. What is his heart? That is the grand question. This is what God looks at. "Man looks on the outward appearance — but the Lord looks on the heart!" (1 Samuel 16:7). This is what Paul lays down distinctly as the standard measure of the soul: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code." (Romans 2:28). Who can doubt that this mighty sentence was written for *Christians* as well as for Jews? He is a Christian, the apostle would have us know — who is one inwardly, and baptism is that of the heart.

The heart is the place where **saving religion must begin**. It is naturally *irreligious*, and must be renewed by the Holy Spirit. "A new heart will I give unto you." It is naturally *hard*, and must be made tender and broken. "I will take away the heart of stone, and I will give you a heart of flesh." "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit — a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." It is naturally *closed* and shut against God, and must be opened. The Lord "opened the heart" of Lydia (Ezekiel 36:26; Psalm 51:7; Acts 16:14).

The heart is the **seat of true saving faith**. "With the heart man believes unto righteousness" (Romans 10:10). A man may believe that Jesus is the Christ, as the devils do — and yet remain in his sins. He may believe that he is a sinner, and that Christ is the only Savior, and feel occasional, lazy wishes that he was a better man. But no one ever lays hold on Christ, and receives pardon and peace, until he believes with the heart. It is *heart-faith* which justifies.

The heart is the **spring of true holiness** and steady continuance in well doing. True Christians are holy, because their hearts are renewed. They obey from the heart. They do the will of God from the heart. Weak, and feeble, and imperfect as all their doings are — they please God, because they are *done from a loving heart*. He who commended the widow's mite more than all the offerings of the wealthy Jews — regards *quality* far more than *quantity*. What He likes to see is, a thing done from an honest and good heart. There is no real holiness without a right heart.

Reader, the things I am saying may sound strange. Perhaps they run counter to all your notions. Perhaps you have thought that if a man's religion is correct *outwardly* — he must be one with whom God is well pleased. You are completely mistaken! You are rejecting the whole tenor of Bible teaching. Outward correctness, without a right heart — is neither more nor less than Phariseeism! The outward things of Christianity — baptism, the Lord's Supper, Church-membership, alms-giving, and the like — will never take any man's soul to Heaven, unless

his heart is right. There must be inward things, as well as outward — and it is on the inward things, that God's eyes are chiefly fixed.

Hear how Paul teaches us about this matter, in three most striking texts. "In Jesus Christ neither circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision — but faith which works by love." "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing — but the keeping of the commandments of God" (Galatians 5:6; Galatians 6:5; 1 Corinthians 7:9). Did the Apostle only mean in these texts, that circumcision was no longer needed under the Gospel? Was that all? No, indeed! I believe he meant much more. He meant that true religion did not consist of *forms*, and that its essence was something far greater than being circumcised or not circumcised. He meant that under Christ Jesus, everything depended on being born again — on having true saving faith — on being holy in life and conduct. He meant that these are the things we ought to look at chiefly, and not at outward forms. "Am I a new creature? Do I really believe on Christ? Am I a holy man?" These are the *grand questions* that I must seek to answer.

When the heart is wrong — all is wrong in God's sight! Many right things may be done. The forms and ordinances which God Himself has appointed may seem to be honored. But so long as the heart is at fault, God is not pleased. He will have man's heart — or nothing.

The *ark* was the most sacred thing in the Jewish tabernacle. On it was the mercy-seat. Within it were the tables of the law, written by God's own finger. The High Priest alone was allowed to go into the place where it was kept, within the veil, and that only once every year. The presence of the ark with the camp was thought to bring a special blessing. And yet this very ark could do the Israelites no more good than any common wooden box — when they trusted to it like an idol, with their hearts full of wickedness. They brought it over into the camp, on a special occasion, saying, "Let us fetch the ark, that it may save us out of the hand of our enemies" (1 Samuel 4:3). When it came into the camp,

they showed it all reverence and honor. "They shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again." But it was all in vain! They were smitten before the Philistines and the ark itself was captured. And why was this? It was because their religion was a *mere form*. They honored the *ark* — but did not give the *God* of the ark their hearts.

There were kings of Judah and Israel who did many things that were right in God's sight — and yet were never written in the list of godly and righteous men. *Rehoboam* began well, and for three years walked in the way of David and Solomon" (2 Chronicles 11:17). But afterwards he did evil, because he prepared not his *heart* to seek the Lord" (2 Chronicles 12. 14). Abijah, in Chronicles, said many things that were right, and fought successfully against Jeroboam. Nevertheless the general verdict is against him. We read, in Kings, that "his *heart* was not perfect with the Lord His God" (1 Kings 15:3). *Amaziah*, we are expressly told, "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord — but not with a perfect *heart*" (2 Chronicles 25:2). *Jehu*, King of Israel, was raised up, by God's command, to put down idolatry. He was a man of special zeal in doing God's work. But unhappily it is written of him, "he took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his *heart* — for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, who made Israel to sin" (2 Kings 10:31). In short, one general remark applies to all these Kings. They were all *wrong inwardly*. They were *rotten at heart*.

There are places of worship at this very day, where all the outward things of religion are done to perfection. The *building* is beautiful. The *service* is beautiful. The *singing* is beautiful. The *forms of devotion* are beautiful. There is everything to gratify the senses. Eye, and ear, and natural sentimentality are all pleased. But all this time, God is not pleased. One thing is lacking, and the lack of that one thing spoils all. What is that one thing? It is heart! God sees, under all this fair outward show — the *form* of religion put in the place of the *substance*; and when He sees that, He is displeased. He sees nothing with an eye of favor in the building, the service, the pastor, or the people — if He does not see converted, renewed, broken, penitent hearts. Bowed heads,

bended knees, loud *amens* — all, all are nothing in God's sight, without right hearts.

When the heart is right — God can look over many things that are defective. There may be faults in judgment, and infirmities in practice. There may be many deviations from the best course in the outward things of religion. But if the heart is sound in the main, God is not extreme to mark that which is amiss. He is merciful and gracious, and will pardon much that is imperfect — when He sees a true heart and a single eye.

Jehoshaphat and Asa were Kings of Judah, who were defective in many things. *Jehoshaphat* was a timid, irresolute man, who joined affinity with Ahab, the wickedest king that ever reigned over Israel. *Asa* was an unstable man, who at one time trusted in the King of Syria more than in God, and at another time was angry with God's prophet for rebuking him (2 Chronicles 16:10). Yet both of them had one great redeeming point in their characters. With all their faults — they had right hearts!

The Passover kept by *Hezekiah* was one at which there were many irregularities. The proper forms were not observed by many. They ate the Passover "otherwise than the commandment" ordered. But they did it with true and honest hearts. And we read that Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, "The good Lord pardon every one who prepares his heart to seek God, though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary. And the Lord hearkened to Hezekiah, and healed the people" (2 Chronicles 30:18-20).

The Passover kept by *Josiah* must have been far smaller and worse attended than scores of Passovers in the days of David and Solomon, or even in the reign of Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah. How then can we account for the strong language used in Scripture about it? "There was no Passover like to that kept in Israel, from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did all the Kings of Israel keep such a Passover as Josiah kept!" (2 Chronicles 35:18). There is but one explanation. There never was a Passover at which the *hearts* of the worshipers were so truly

in the feast. The Lord does not look at the *quantity* of worshipers — so much as the *quality*. The glory of Josiah's Passover, was the state of people's hearts.

There are many assemblies of Christian worshipers on earth, at this very day, in which there is literally nothing to attract the natural man. They meet in miserable dirty chapels — or in wretched upper rooms and cellars. They sing unmusically. They hear feeble prayers, and more feeble sermons. And yet the Holy Spirit is often in the midst of them! Sinners are often converted in them, and the kingdom of God prospers far more than in any grand Roman Catholic cathedral, or than many gorgeous Protestant churches. How is this? How can it be explained? The cause is simply thus: that in these humble assemblies, heart-religion is taught and held. Heart-work is aimed at. Heart-work is honored. And the consequence is, that God is pleased and grants His blessing.

Reader, I leave this part of my subject here. I ask you to weigh well the things that I have been saying. I believe that they will bear examination, and are all true. Resolve this day, whatever Church you belong to — to be a Christian in heart. Whether Episcopalian or Presbyterian, Baptist or Independent — be not content with a mere *form of godliness*, without the power. Settle it down firmly in your minds, that *formal* religion is not saving religion, and that *heart* religion is the only religion that leads to Heaven.

I only give you one word of *caution*. Do not suppose because formal religion will not save, that forms of religion are of no use at all. Beware of any such senseless extreme. The *misuse* of a thing is no argument against the *right use* of it. The *blind idolatry of forms* which prevails in some quarters, is no reason why you should throw all forms aside. The ark, when made an idol of by Israel and put in the place of God, was unable to save them from the Philistines. And yet the same ark, when irreverently and profanely handled, brought death on Uzza; and when honored and revered, brought a blessing on the house of Obed-Edom. These words are strong, but true: "He who has but a form — is a

hypocrite; but he who has not a form — is an Atheist" (Hall's sermons, No. 28). Forms cannot *save* us — but they are not therefore to be *despised*. A lantern is not a man's home — and yet it is a *help* to a man if he travels towards his home in a dark night. Use the forms of Christianity diligently — and you will find them a blessing. Only remember, in all your use of forms, the great principle, that *the first thing in religion is the state of the heart*.

I come now to the last thing which I proposed to consider.

III. I said that true religion must never expect to be *popular*. It will not have the praise of *man* — but of *God*.

Reader, I dare not turn away from this part of my subject, however painful it may be. As anxious as I am to commend heart-religion to every one who reads this tract — I will not try to conceal what heart-religion entails. I will not gain a recruit for my Master's army under false pretenses. I will not promise anything which the Scripture does not warrant. The words of Paul are clear and unmistakable. Heart-religion is a religion "whose praise is not of men — but of God" (Romans 2:29).

God's truth and Scriptural Christianity are never really *popular*. They never have been. They never will be, as long as the world stands. No one can calmly consider what *human nature* is, as described in the Bible — and reasonably expect anything else. As long as man is what man is — the majority of mankind will always like a *religion of form*, far better than a religion of heart.

Formal religion just suits an unenlightened conscience. Some religion a man will have. Atheism and downright infidelity, as a general rule, are never very popular. But a man must have a religion which does not *require* much — nor *trouble* his heart much — nor interfere with his *sins* much. Formal Christianity satisfies him. It seems the very thing that he needs.

Formal religion *gratifies the secret self-righteousness* of man. We are, all of us, more or less Pharisees. We all naturally cling to the idea that the way to be saved is to *do* so many religious things, and *go* through so many religious observances — and that at last we shall get to Heaven. Formalism meets us here. It seems to show us a way by which we can make our own peace with God.

Formal religion *pleases the natural indolence of man*. It attaches an excessive importance to that which is the *easiest* part of Christianity — the *shell* and the *form*.

Man likes this. He hates trouble in religion. He wants something which will not meddle with his conscience and inner life. Only leave conscience alone, and, like Herod, he will "do many things." Formalism seems to open a *wider gate*, and a *more easy way* to Heaven (Mark 6:20). Facts speak louder than assertions. *Facts are stubborn things*. Look over the history of religion in every age of the world, and observe what has always been popular.

Look at the history of *Israel* from the beginning of Exodus to the end of the Acts of the Apostles — and see what has always found favor. Formalism was one main sin against which the Old Testament prophets were continually protesting. Formalism was the great plague which had overspread the Jews, when our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world.

Look at the history of the *Christian Church* after the days of the Apostles. How soon formalism ate out the life and vitality of the primitive Christians!

Look at the *middle ages*, as they are called. Formalism so completely covered the face of Christendom that the Gospel lay as one dead.

Look, lastly, at the history of *Protestant Churches* in the three last centuries. How few are the places where religion is a living thing! How many are the countries where Protestantism is nothing more than a mere form!

There is no getting over these things. They speak with a voice of thunder. They all show that formal religion is a *popular* thing. It has the praise of man.

But why should we look at facts in history! Why should we not look at facts under our own eyes, and by our own doors? Can anyone deny that a mere outward religion, a religion of downright formality — is the religion which is popular in England at the present day? Only say your prayers — and go to church with tolerable regularity — and receive the sacrament occasionally — and the vast majority of Englishmen will set you down as *an excellent Christian*. "What more would you have?" they say: "If this is not Christianity — then what is?" To require more of anyone is thought bigotry, intolerance, fanaticism, and enthusiasm! To insinuate a doubt whether such a man as this will go to Heaven, is called the height of uncharitableness! Reader, when these things are so, it is vain to deny that formal religion is *popular*. It is popular. It always was popular. It always will be popular, until Christ comes again. It always has had, and always will have the praise of man.

Turn now to the religion of the heart, and you will hear a very different report. As a general rule, it has never had the good word of mankind. It has entailed on its professors laughter, mockery, ridicule, scorn, contempt, enmity, hatred, slander, persecution, imprisonment, and even death. Its lovers have been faithful and ardent — but they have always been few. It has never had, comparatively, the praise of man.

Heart-religion is too **humbling** to be popular. It leaves natural man no room to boast. It tells him that he is a guilty, lost, hell-deserving sinner, and that he must flee to Christ for salvation. It tells him that he is dead, and must be made alive again, and born of the Spirit. The pride of man rebels against such tidings as these. He hates to be told that his case is so bad.

Heart-religion is too **holy** to be popular. It will not leave natural man alone. It interferes with his *worldliness* and his *sins*. It requires of him things that he loathes and abominates — conversion, faith, repentance,

spiritual-mindedness, Bible reading, prayer. It bids him give up many things that he loves and clings to, and cannot make up his mind to lay aside. It would be strange indeed if he *liked* it. It crosses his path as a *kill-joy* — and it is absurd to expect that he will be pleased.

Was heart-religion popular in *Old Testament* times? We find David complaining, "Those who sit in the gate speak against me; and I was the song of the drunkards" (Psalm 69:12). We find the prophets persecuted and ill-treated, because they preached against sin, and required men to give their hearts to God. Elijah, Micaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, are all cases in point. To formalism and ceremonialism, the Jews never seem to have made objection. What they did dislike, was serving God with their hearts.

Was heart-religion popular in *New Testament* times? The whole history of our Lord Jesus Christ's ministry, and the lives of His apostles, are a sufficient answer. The Scribes and Pharisees would have willingly received a Messiah who encouraged *formalism*, and a Gospel which exalted *ceremonialism*. But they could not tolerate a religion of which the first principles were *humiliation* and *holiness* of heart.

Has heart-religion ever been popular in the professing Church of Christ during the last eighteen centuries? Never hardly, except in the early centuries, when the primitive Church had not left her first love. Soon, very soon, the men who protested against *formalism* and *sacramentalism* were fiercely denounced as "troublers of Israel." Long before the Reformation, things came to this pass, that anyone who cried up heart-holiness and cried down formality, was treated as a common enemy! He was either silenced, excommunicated, imprisoned, or put to death, like John Huss. In the time of the Reformation itself, the work of Luther and his companions was carried on under an incessant storm of calumny and slander. And what was the cause? It was because they protested against formalism, ceremonialism, monkery, and priestcraft — and taught the necessity of heart-religion.

Has heart-religion ever been popular in our own land in days gone by? Never, excepting for a little season. It was not popular in the days of Queen Mary, when Latimer and his brother-martyrs were burned. It was not popular in the days of the Stuarts, when to be a *Puritan* was worse for a man than to get drunk or swear. It was not popular in the middle of last century, when Wesley and Whitfield were shut out of the Established Church. The cause of our martyred Reformers, of the early Puritans, and of the Methodists, was essentially one and the same. They were all hated because they preached the *uselessness of formalism*, and the impossibility of salvation without repentance, faith, regeneration, and holiness of heart.

Is heart-religion popular in England at this very day? I answer sorrowfully that I do not believe it! Look at the followers of it among the *laity*. They are always comparatively few in number. They stand alone in their respective congregations and parishes. They have to put up with many hard things, hard words, hard imputations, hard treatment, laughter, ridicule, slander, and petty persecution. This is not popularity!

Look at the teachers of heart-religion in the *pulpit*. They are loved and liked, no doubt, by the few hearers who agree with them. They are sometimes admired for their talents and eloquence by the many who do not agree with them. They are even called popular preachers, because of the crowds who listen to their preaching. But none know so well as the faithful teachers of heart-religion, that few really *like* them. Few really *help* them. Few *sympathize* with them. Few stand by them in any time of need. They find, like their Divine Master, that they must work almost alone. I write these things with sorrow — but I believe they are true. Real heart-religion at this day, no less than in days gone by, has not "the praise of man."

But after all, it signifies little what *man* thinks, and what man praises. He who judges us is the Lord. *Man* will not judge us at the last day. Man will not sit on the great white throne, examine our religion, and pronounce our eternal sentence. Those only whom God commends, will

be commended at the bar of Christ. Here lies the value and glory of heart-religion. It may not have the praise of man — but it has "the praise of God."

God approves and honors heart-religion in the present life. He looks down from Heaven, and reads the hearts of all men. Wherever He sees . .

heart-repentance for sin,
heart-faith in Christ,
heart-holiness of life,
heart-love to His Son, His law, His will, and His word

— wherever God sees these things, He is well pleased. He writes a book of remembrance for that man, however poor and unlearned he may be. He gives His angels special charge over him. He maintains in him the work of grace, and gives him daily supplies of peace, hope, and strength. He regards him as a member of His own dear Son, as one who is witnessing for the truth, as His Son did. As weak as the man's heart may seem to himself, it is the *living sacrifice* which God loves, and the heart which He has solemnly declared He will not despise. Reader, such praise is worth more than the praise of man!

God will proclaim His approval of heart religion before the assembled world at the *last day*. He will command His angels to gather together His saints, from every part of the globe, into one glorious company. He will raise the dead and change the living — and place them at the right hand of His beloved Son's throne. Then all who have served Christ with the *heart* shall hear Him say, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father — receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world! You were faithful over few things — and I will make you rulers over many things; enter into the joy of your Lord. You confessed Me before men, and I will confess you before My Father and His holy angels. I appoint unto you a kingdom!"

Reader, these words will be addressed to none but those who have given Christ their hearts! They will not be addressed to the formalist, the hypocrite, the wicked, and the ungodly. They will, indeed, stand by, and see the *fruits* of heart-religion — but they will not eat of them. We shall never know the full value of heart-religion until the last day. Then, and only then, we shall fully understand how much better it is to have the praise of God, than the praise of man.

Reader, if you take up heart-religion, I cannot promise you the praise of man. Pardon, peace, hope, guidance, comfort consolation, grace according to your need, strength according to your day, joy which the world can neither give nor take away — all this I can boldly promise to the man who comes to Christ, and serves Him with his heart. But I cannot promise him that his religion will be *popular* with man. I would rather warn him to expect mockery and ridicule, slander and unkindness, opposition and persecution. There is a *cross* belonging to heart-religion, and we must be content to *carry* it. "Through much tribulation, we must enter the kingdom." "All who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12). But if the world hates you — God will love you. If the world forsakes you — Christ has promised that He will never forsake and never fail. Reader, whatever you may lose by heart-religion, be sure that the praise of God will make up for all.

And now I close this tract with three plain words of ***APPLICATION***. I want it to strike and stick to the conscience of every one into whose hands it falls. May God make it a blessing to many a soul, both in time and eternity!

1. Reader, is your religion a matter of form and not of heart? Answer this question honestly, and as in the sight of God. If it is, consider solemnly the *immense danger* in which you stand.

You have got nothing to *comfort* your soul in the day of trial, nothing to give you *hope* on your death-bed, nothing to *save* you at the last day. *Formal religion never took any man to Heaven*. Like base metal, it

will not stand the fire. Continuing in your present state, you are in imminent peril of being lost forever.

Reader, I earnestly beseech you this day to know your danger, to open your eyes and repent. Churchman or Dissenter, high church or low church, if you have only a *name to live*, and a *form of godliness* without the power — awake and repent. Awake, above all, if you are an *Evangelical formalist*. "There is no devil," said the quaint old Puritans, "like a *white* devil." There is no formalism so dangerous — as Evangelical formalism.

I can only warn you. I do so with all affection. God alone can apply the warning to your soul. Oh, that you would see the *folly* as well as the *danger* of a *heartless Christianity!* It was sound advice which a dying man once gave to his son: "Son," he said, "whatever religion you have, never be content with wearing a *cloak*."

2. Reader, if your heart condemns you, and you wish to know what to do, consider seriously the only course that you can safely take.

Apply to the Lord Jesus Christ without delay, and spread before Him the state of your soul. Confess before Him your formality in time past, and ask Him to forgive it. Seek from Him the promised grace of the Holy Spirit, and entreat Him to quicken and renew your inward man.

The Lord Jesus is appointed and commissioned to be the *Physician of man's soul*. There is no case too hard for Him. There is no condition of soul which He cannot cure. Seared and hardened as the heart of a formalist may be — there is balm in Gilead which can heal him, and a Physician who is mighty to save. Reader, go and call on the Lord Jesus Christ this very day. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Luke 11:9).

3. Reader, if your heart condemns you not, and you have real well-grounded confidence towards God, consider seriously the many *responsibilities* of your position.

Praise Him daily who has called you out of darkness into light, and made you to differ. Praise Him daily, and ask Him never to forsake the work of His own hands.

Watch with a jealous watchfulness every part of your inward man. Formality is ever ready to come in upon us, like the Egyptian plague of frogs, even into the king's chamber. Watch, and be on your guard. Watch over your Bible-reading, your praying — your temper and your tongue, your family life and your Sunday religion. There is nothing so good and spiritual, that we may not fall into *formal habits* about it. There is none so spiritual, but that he may have a heavy fall. Watch, therefore, and be on your guard.

Look forward, finally, and hope for the coming of the Lord. *Your best things are yet to come!* The second coming of Christ will soon be here. The time of temptation will soon be past and gone. The judgment and reward of the saints shall soon make amends for all. Rest in the hope of that day. Work, watch, and look forward. One thing, at any rate, that day will make abundantly clear. It will show that there was never an hour in our lives in which we gave our hearts too thoroughly to Christ!