

“A Christian’s Books” No. 6 Spiritual Life
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The next large class of Christian books to consider are those devoted to the pursuit of godliness, to the living of the Christian life, to the cultivation of the heart, and to the practice of devotion. These are books of spirituality as the term is employed in Christian history. It is an immense library of very different sorts of books. At the outset I should acknowledge that a great deal about the life of faith can be gleaned from books that are not specifically devoted to these themes. I have already mentioned, for example, what great help and encouragement I have found for my own life in reading Christian biography and autobiography. I learned a great deal about besetting sins from reading Thomas Boston’s *Memoir* and about mastering temptations from the biographies of Charles Simeon. Books of sermons – to which I will devote a separate installment in this series – have also been of great value. But there are many books specifically written to help Christians live godly lives.

Naturally we begin with the classics. The great works of Christian devotion are classics precisely because they put timeless truth in memorable form. It is in Augustine’s *Confessions* that we learn the form of prayer that every Christian must eventually learn: “Command what you will, but give what you command.” In á Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, in one immortal paragraph, we learn how temptations arise and how they work. In *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a book that literally bristles with insights into the way of godliness, we learn, for example, that Christian’s great battle with Apollyon happened just past Forgetful Green. These books reproduce the lessons their brilliant authors learned from observing their own lives and the lives of others with Holy Scripture in hand. There are many other such classics that deserve to be read by every Christian and, though old and so somewhat more difficult for modern readers, can still be read with great profit by any truly interested Christian. I am thinking of books such as Henry Scougal’s *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, Thomas Watson’s *Heaven Taken By Storm*, William Gurnall’s *The Christian in Complete Armor*, Philip Doddridge’s *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, and John Newton’s *Cardiphonia* (a collection of his letters full of the most practical and helpful advice). There is no possibility of mentioning all the books of this type that would you would be grateful for having read. And of course, there is a good deal of modern material, easier to read, that is built upon this foundation. John Piper and Sinclair Ferguson, among many others, have written books on the Christian life that are of real value. The point is: a Christian can drink all his or her life of this inspiring, instructive, and helpful material on the life of faith and godliness and the well will never run dry.

Everyone, to be sure, will not find the same books equally helpful. My late sister loved the *Devotions* of John Donne and they were of great help to her at a difficult time in her life, but I know that all will not find Donne as inspiring as she did. I have recommended to a number of people through the years the Puritan Walter Marshall’s *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*. It is the classic statement of the Puritan/Reformed doctrine of sanctification as the growth of godliness *by faith*. People in the 17th century, as people

today, easily fell into thinking that while justification is by faith sanctification is by works and there was then as now no easier way to discourage oneself in the life of faith than to rest one's progress on one's own efforts rather than on the grace of God and the present working of the Holy Spirit. Marshall will clear the confusion away. But, I must confess, many find Marshall tough sledding. A pastor friend of mine absolutely adores Oswald Chambers' devotional classic *My Utmost for His Highest*. I love Chambers; he was a great Christian, but I've never found that work as valuable as my friend does.

I must impose some limit on myself so let me recommend to you four works that I have found a great help in my own life and am sure you will as well. If you have been at Faith Presbyterian very long you will not be surprised to read the names of these authors. They appear often enough in my sermons. The first is John Owen, the prince of the Puritan theologians, but also a master craftsman of the Christian life. His three short works collected in volume six of his collected *Works – On the Mortification of Sin, On Temptation, and On Indwelling Sin in Believers* – are masterpieces of the art of godliness. It was these writings, says Dr. J.I. Packer, that delivered him as a young Christian from some disabling ideas about the Christian life and how it is to be lived that he had imbibed from the spiritual culture in which he had been saved. I thank God for these works myself, remembering with gratitude how much they helped me when I first read them as a young man. Some of his advice in the battle with temptation is as present to my mind as it was the first day I read it: “Venture all on the first attempt!” Owen is not terribly easy to read, which is why Jerry Bridges attempted some years ago to present the marrow of Owen's works on sin and godliness in a simpler, more contemporary form in his *The Pursuit of Holiness* and why Covenant College professor Kelly Kapic has brought Owen's three works out in a new edition entitled *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*. But in whatever form you read the great Puritan you will find here the most practical and helpful advice for conquering your sins which is, after all, what godliness requires!

The second is J.C. Ryle's *Holiness*. First published in 1877, it was the republication of this book at the suggestion of Martyn Lloyd Jones in 1952 that proved to be the catalyst of the rediscovery by English speaking evangelical Christianity of the Puritan tradition. Ryle was a 19th century Anglican bishop (he died in 1900), but he drank deeply from the springs of the first and second Reformations and communicated that glorious teaching in crystal clear English prose. The number of earnest Christians who have found great help for themselves in this book is very large!

The third is a much more contemporary work, J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*. I suspect there will be few Christian books written in the twentieth century that will be regarded as must reading still several centuries from now. I predict that among those few will be this masterpiece of Christian theological devotion. Many of you will have read it but, given that it was originally published in 1973, I suspect that there are many, even in our own church, who are either unaware of the book or who have not realized how valuable it is. Packer writes as clearly as anyone can. He is additionally a first class professional theologian. Rich biblical/theological scholarship in beautiful English is what you will find in *Knowing God* along with lesson upon lesson for your daily life.

Finally, let me recommend to you all a very different kind of book, Samuel Rutherford's *Letters*. Written in the 17th century by a spiritual genius in a style utterly unparalleled, these letters, collected and published after the great man's death, are a window on the life every true Christian aspires to live. Here you find out what it means to love Jesus Christ, to walk with him, to see heaven from afar, to cherish God's people, and to walk through the valley of the shadow of death in faith and hope. And all the way through you come upon priceless pieces of holy advice; counsel such as this: "Break off a piece of sin each day." In these letters, as almost nowhere else, you will actually hear the joy of salvation. Charles Spurgeon once said, "When we are dead and gone, let the world know that Spurgeon held Rutherford's *Letters* to be the nearest thing to inspiration which can be found in all the writings of mere men." And Richard Baxter spoke similarly: "Hold off the Bible, such a book as Mr. Rutherford's *Letters* the world never saw the like." Some recommendations!

All of these books will make you *really want* to be a better Christian, and as every experienced Christian will tell you, really wanting holiness and a deeper faith is more than half the battle.