

# Visible Churches Warned

by J.C. Ryle

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of visible churches and the need for Christians to focus on faith, repentance, and holiness rather than church government and ceremonies.*

**Scripture:** Numbers 24:13, 1 Samuel 2:3, Matthew 25:37-39, Luke 6:44, 1 Corinthians 3:8, Ephesians 6:13-17, Titus 1:16, James 1:22, Revelation 3:22, Revelation 14:13

**Topics:** "Faith and Works", "Overcoming Complacency"

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## Description

J.C. Ryle warns visible churches about the importance of genuine faith and the dangers of complacency in religious practices. He emphasizes that the letters to the seven churches in Revelation focus on doctrine, personal faith, and the necessity of overcoming sin rather than church governance or rituals. Ryle urges believers to recognize that true Christianity is a personal relationship with Christ, marked by repentance and active faith, rather than mere membership in a church. He highlights that Jesus knows our works and will reward the faithful while warning against hypocrisy and complacency. The sermon calls for a deeper commitment to spiritual growth and a life that reflects true Christian values.

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## Transcript

Visible Churches Warned

'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the Churches' (Rev. 3:22).

I suppose I may take it for granted that every reader of this message belongs to some visible church of Christ. I do not ask now whether you are an Episcopalian, or a Presbyterian, or an Independent. I only suppose that you would not like to be called an atheist or an infidel. You attend the public worship of some visible, particular or national body of professing Christians.

Now, whatever the name of your church may be, I invite your special attention to the verse of Scripture before your eyes. I charge you to remember that the words of that verse concern yourself. They are written for your learning, and for all who call themselves Christians. 'He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches'.

This verse is repeated seven times over in the second and third chapters of the book of Revelation. Seven different letters does the Lord Jesus there send by the hand of His servant John to the seven churches of Asia. Seven times over He winds up His letter by the same solemn words: 'He that has an ear, let him

hear what the Spirit says unto the churches'.

Now the Lord God is perfect in all His works. He does nothing by chance. He caused no part of the Scriptures to be written by chance. In all His dealings you may trace design, purpose and plan. There was design in the size and orbit of each planet. There was design in the shape and structure of the least fly's wing. There was design in every verse of the Bible. There was design in every repetition of a verse, wherever it took place. There was design in the sevenfold repetition of the verse before our eyes. It had a meaning, and we were intended to observe it.

This verse appears to me to call the special attention of all true Christians to the seven 'epistles to the churches'. I believe it was meant to make believers take particular notice of the things which these seven epistles contain.

Let me try to point out certain leading truths which these seven epistles seem to me to teach. They are truths for the times we live in, truths for the latter days, truths which we cannot know too well, truths which it would be good for us all to know and feel far better than we do.

1. I ask my readers to observe that the Lord Jesus, in all the seven epistles, speaks of nothing but matters of doctrine, practice, warning and promise.

I ask you to look over these seven epistles to the churches, quietly and at your leisure, and you will soon see what I mean.

You will observe that the Lord Jesus sometimes finds fault with false doctrines and ungodly inconsistent practices, and rebukes them sharply.

You will observe that He sometimes praises faith, patience, work, labor, perseverance and bestows on these graces high commendation.

You will sometimes find Him enjoining repentance, amendment, return to the first love, renewed application to Himself, and the like.

But I want you to observe that you will not find the Lord, in any of the epistles, dwelling upon church government or ceremonies. He says nothing about sacraments or ordinances. He makes no mention of liturgies or forms. He does not instruct John to write one word about baptism, or the Lord's Supper, or the apostolical succession of ministers. In short, the leading principles of what may be called 'the sacramental system' are not brought forward in any one of the seven epistles from first to last.

Now why do I dwell on this? I do it because many professing Christians in the present day would have us believe these things are of first, of cardinal, of paramount importance.

There are not a few who seem to hold that there can be no church without a bishop, and no godliness without a liturgy. They appear to believe that to teach the value of the sacraments is the first work of a minister, and to keep to their parish church the first business of a people.

Now let no man misunderstand me when I say this. Do not run away with the notion that I see no importance in sacraments. On the contrary, I regard them as great blessings to all who receive them 'rightly, worthily and with faith'. Do not fancy that I attach no value to episcopacy, a liturgy and the parochial system. On the contrary, I consider that a church well administered, which has these three

things, and an evangelical ministry, is a far more complete and useful church than one in which they are not to be found.

But this I say, that sacraments, church government, the use of a liturgy, the observance of ceremonies and forms, are all as nothing compared to faith, repentance and holiness. And my authority for so saying is the whole tenor of our Lord's words to the seven churches.

I never can believe, if a certain form of church government was so very important as some say, that the great Head of the church would have said nothing about it here. I should have expected to have found something said about it to Sardis and Laodicea. But I find nothing at all. And I think that silence is a great fact.

I cannot help remarking just the same fact in Paul's parting words to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:27-35). He was then leaving them forever. He was giving his last charge on earth, and spoke as one who would see the faces of his hearers no more. And yet there is not a word in the charge about the sacraments and church government. If ever there was a time for speaking of them, it was then. But he says nothing at all, and I believe it was an intentional silence.

Now here lies one reason why we who, rightly or wrongly, are called evangelical clergy, do not preach about bishops, and the Prayer Book, and ordinances more than we do. It is not because we do not value them, in their place, proportion and way. We do value them as really and truly as any, and are thankful for them. But we believe that repentance towards God, faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ and a holy conversation are subjects of far more importance to men's souls. Without these no man can be saved. These are the first and most weighty matters, and therefore on these we dwell.

Here again lies one reason why we so often urge on men not to be content with the mere outward part of religion. You must have observed that we often warn you not to rest on church membership and church privileges. We tell you not to be satisfied all is right because you come to church on Sunday, and come up to the Lord's table. We often urge you to remember, that he is not a Christian who is one outwardly, that you must be 'born again,' that you must have a 'faith that works by love,' that there must be a 'new creation' by the Spirit in your heart. We do it because this seems to us the mind of Christ. These are the kind of things He dwells upon, when writing seven times over to seven different churches. We feel that if we follow Him we cannot greatly err.

I am aware that men charge us with taking 'low views' of the subjects to which I have adverted. It is a small thing that our views are thought 'low,' so long as our consciences tell us they are scriptural. High ground, as it is called, is not always safe ground. What Balaam said must be our answer 'What the Lord says, that will I speak' (Num. 24:13).

The plain truth is, there are two distinct and separate systems of Christianity in England at the present day. It is useless to deny it. Their existence is a great fact and one that cannot be too clearly known.

According to one system, religion is a mere corporate business. You are to belong to a certain body of people. By virtue of your membership of this body, vast privileges, both for time and eternity, are conferred upon you. It matters little what you are and what you feel. You are not to try yourself by your feelings. You are a member of a great ecclesiastical corporation. Then all its privileges and immunities are your own. Do you belong to the one true visible ecclesiastical corporation? That is the grand question.

According to the other system, religion is eminently a personal business between yourself and Christ. It will not save your soul to be an outward member of any ecclesiastical body whatever, however sound that body may be. Such membership will not wash away one sin, or give you confidence in the day of judgment. There must be personal faith in Christ, personal dealings between yourself and God, personal felt communion between your own heart and the Holy Spirit. Have you this personal faith? Have you this felt work of the Spirit in your soul? This is the grand question. If not you will be lost.

This last system is the system which those who are called evangelical ministers cleave to and teach. They do so, because they are satisfied that it is the system of Holy Scripture. They do so, because they are convinced that any other system is productive of most dangerous consequences, and calculated to delude men fatally as to their actual state. They do so because they believe it to be the only system of teaching which God will bless, and that no church will flourish so much as that in which repentance, faith, conversion and the work of the Spirit are the grand subjects of the minister's sermon.

2. I ask my readers to observe that in every epistle the Lord Jesus says, 'I know your works'. That repeated expression is very striking. It is not for nothing that we read these words seven times over.

To one church the Lord Jesus says, 'I know your labor and patience', to another, 'your tribulation and poverty', to a third, 'your charity and service and faith'. But to all He uses the words I now dwell on 'I know your works'. It is not 'I know your profession, your desires, your resolutions, your wishes', but 'your works'. 'I know your works'.

The works of a professing Christian are of great importance. They cannot save your soul. They cannot justify you. They cannot wipe out your sins. They cannot deliver you from the wrath of God. But it does not follow because they cannot save you, that they are of no importance. Take heed and beware of such a notion. The man who thinks so is fearfully deceived.

I often think I could willingly die for the doctrine of justification by faith without the deeds of the law. But I must earnestly contend, as a general principle, that a man's works are the evidence of a man's religion. If you call yourself a Christian, you must show it in your daily ways and daily behavior. Call to mind that the faith of Abraham and of Rahab was proved by their works (James 2:21-25). Remember it avails you and me nothing to profess we know God, if in works we deny Him (Titus 1:16). Remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'Every tree is known by its own fruit' (Luke 6:44).

But whatever the works of a professing Christian may be, Jesus says, 'I know them!' His eyes are in every place, beholding the evil and the good (Prov. 15:3). You never did an action, however private, but Jesus saw it. You never spoke a word, no, not even in a whisper, but Jesus heard it. You never wrote a letter, even to your dearest friend, but Jesus read it. You never thought a thought, however secret, but Jesus was familiar with it. His eyes are as a flaming fire. The darkness is no darkness with Him. All things are open and manifest before Him. He says to every one, 'I know your works'.

a. The Lord Jesus knows the works of all impenitent and unbelieving souls, and will one day punish them. They are not forgotten in heaven, though they may be upon earth. When the great white throne is set, and the books are opened, the wicked dead will be judged 'according to their works'.

b. The Lord Jesus knows the works of His own people, and weighs them. 'By Him actions are weighed' (1 Sam. 2:3). He knows the why and the wherefore of the deeds of all believers. He sees their motives in every step they take. He discerns how much is done for His sake, and how much is done for the sake of

praise. Alas, not a few things are done by believers, which seem very good to you and me, but are rated very low by Christ.

c. The Lord Jesus knows the works of all His own people, and will one day reward them. He never overlooks a kind word, or a kind deed done in His name. He will own the least fruit of faith, and declare it before the world in the day of His appearing. If you love the Lord Jesus, and follow Him, you may be sure your work and labor shall not be in vain in the Lord. The works of those that die in the Lord 'shall follow them' (Rev. 14:13). They shall not go before them, nor yet by their side, but they shall follow them, and be owned in the day of Christ's appearing. The parable of the pounds shall be made good. 'Every man shall receive his own reward, according to his own labor' (1 Cor. 3:8). The world knows you not, for it knows not your Master. But Jesus sees and knows all. 'I know your works'.

Think what a solemn warning there is here to all worldly and hypocritical professors of religion. Let all such read, mark and digest these words. Jesus says to you, 'I know your works'. You may deceive me or any other minister; it is easy to do so. You may receive the bread and wine from my hands, and yet be cleaving to iniquity in your hearts. You may sit under the pulpit of an evangelical preacher, week after week, and hear his words with a serious face, but believe them not. But, remember this, you cannot deceive Christ. He who discovered the deadness of Sardis and the lukewarmness of Laodicea, sees you through and through, and will expose you at the last day, except you repent.

Oh, believe me, hypocrisy is a losing game. It will never answer to seem one thing and be another; to have the name of Christian, and not the reality. Be sure, if your conscience smites you and condemns you in this matter, be sure your sin will find you out. The eye that saw Achan steal the golden wedge and hide it is upon you. The book that recorded the deeds of Gehazi and Ananias and Sapphira is recording your ways. Jesus mercifully sends you a word of warning today. He says, 'I know your works'.

But think also, what encouragement there is here for every honest and true-hearted believer. To you also, Jesus says, 'I know your works'. You see no beauty in any action that you do. All seems imperfect, blemished and defiled. You are often sick at heart of your own shortcomings. You often feel that your whole life is one great arrear, and that every day is either a blank or a blot. But know now, that Jesus can see some beauty in everything that you do from a conscientious desire to please Him. His eye can discern excellence in the least thing which is a fruit of His own Spirit. He can pick out the grains of gold from amid the dross of your performances, and sift the wheat from amid the chaff in all your doings. Your tears are all put into His bottle. Your endeavors to do good to others, however feeble, are written in His book of remembrance. The least cup of cold water given in His name shall not lose its reward. He does not forget your work and labor of love, however little the world may regard it.

It is very wonderful, but so it is. Jesus loves to honor the work of His Spirit in His people, and to pass over their frailties. He dwells on the faith of Rahab, but not on her lie. He commends His apostles for continuing with Him in His temptations, and passes over their ignorance and want of faith (Luke 22:28). 'Like as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities them that fear Him' (Ps. 103:13). And as a father finds a pleasure in the least acts of his children, of which a stranger knows nothing, so I suppose the Lord finds a pleasure in our poor feeble efforts to serve Him.

I can well understand the righteous in the day of judgment saying, 'Lord, when saw we You an hungry, and fed You, or thirsty, and gave You drink? When saw we You a stranger, and took You in? Or naked, and clothed You? Or when saw we You sick or in prison, and came unto You?' (Matt. 25:37-39). It may well

seem incredible and impossible that they can have done anything worth naming in the great day! Yet so it is. Let all believers take the comfort of it. The Lord says, 'I know your works.' It ought to humble you. But it ought not to make you afraid.

3. I ask my readers to observe that in every epistle the Lord Jesus makes a promise to the man that overcomes. Seven times over Jesus gives to the churches exceeding great and precious promises. Each is different, and each full of strong consolation: but each is addressed to the overcoming Christian. It is always 'he that overcomes', or 'to him that overcomes'. I ask you to take notice of this.

Every professing Christian is the soldier of Christ. He is bound by his baptism to fight Christ's battle against sin, the world and the devil. The man that does not do this breaks his vow. He is a spiritual defaulter. He does not fulfill the engagements made for him. The man that does not do this is practically renouncing his Christianity. The very fact that he belongs to a church, attends a Christian place of worship, and calls himself a Christian, is a public declaration that he desires to be reckoned a soldier of Jesus Christ.

Armor is provided for the professing Christian, if he will only use it. 'Take unto you', says Paul to the Ephesians, 'the whole armor of God'. 'Stand, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness'. 'Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God'. 'Above all, take the shield of faith' (Eph. 6:13-17). And, not least, the professing Christian has the best of leaders: Jesus the Captain of salvation, through whom he may be more than conqueror; the best of provisions, the bread and water of life, and the best of pay promised to him, an eternal weight of glory.

All these are ancient things. I will not be drawn off from my subject, in order to dwell on them now.

The one point I want to impress upon your soul just now is this, that the true believer is not only a soldier, but a victorious soldier. He not only professes to fight on Christ's side against sin, the world and the devil, but he does actually fight and overcome.

Now this is one grand distinguishing mark of true Christians. Other men, perhaps, like to be numbered in the ranks of Christ's army. Other men may have lazy wishes and languid desires after the crown of glory. But it is the true Christian alone who does the work of a soldier. He alone fairly meets the enemies of his soul, really fights with them and in that fight overcomes them.

One great lesson I want men to learn from these seven epistles is this, that if you would prove you are born again and going to heaven, you must be a victorious soldier of Christ. If you would make it clear that you have any title to Christ's precious promises, you must fight the good fight in Christ's cause, and in that fight you must conquer.

Victory is the only satisfactory evidence that you have a saving religion. You like good sermons perhaps. You respect the Bible, and read it occasionally. You say your prayers night and morning. You have family prayers, and give to religious societies. I thank God for this. It is all very good. But how goes the battle? How does the great conflict go on all this time? Are you overcoming the love of the world and the fear of man? Are you overcoming the passions, tempers and lusts of your own heart? Are you resisting the devil and making him flee from you? How is it in this matter? You must either rule or serve sin and the devil and the world. There is no middle course. You must either conquer or be lost.

I know well it is a hard battle that you have to fight, and I want you to know it, too. You must fight the good fight of faith and endure hardships if you would lay hold of eternal life. You must make up your mind to a daily struggle if you would reach heaven. There may be short roads to heaven invented by man, but ancient Christianity, the good old way, is the way of the cross, the way of conflict. Sin, the world and the devil must be actually mortified, resisted and overcome.

This is the road that saints of old have trodden in, and left their record on high.

a. When Moses refused the pleasures of sin in Egypt, and chose affliction with the people of God, this was overcoming he overcame the love of pleasure.

b. When Micaiah refused to prophesy smooth things to king Ahab, though he knew he would be persecuted if he spoke the truth, this was overcoming he overcame the love of ease.

c. When Daniel refused to give up praying, though he knew the den of lions was prepared for him, this was overcoming he overcame the fear of death.

d. When Matthew rose from the receipt of custom at our Lord's bidding, left all and followed Him, this was overcoming he overcame the love of money.

e. When Peter and John stood up boldly before the council and said, 'We cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard,' this was overcoming; they overcame the fear of man.

f. When Saul the Pharisee gave up all his prospects of preferment among the Jews, and preached that very Jesus whom he had once persecuted, this was overcoming he overcame the love of man's praise.

The same kind of thing which these men did you must also do if you would be saved. They were men of like passions with yourself, and yet they overcame. They had as many trials as you can possibly have, and yet they overcame. They fought. They wrestled. They struggled. You must do the same.

What was the secret of their victory? Their faith. They believed on Jesus and, believing, were made strong. They believed on Jesus and, believing, were held up. In all their battles, they kept their eyes on Jesus, and He never left them nor forsook them. 'They overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony,' and so may you (Rev. 12:11).

I set these words before you. I ask you to lay them to heart. Resolve, by the grace of God, to be an overcoming Christian.

I fear much for many professing Christians. I see no sign of fighting in them, much less of victory. They never strike one stroke on the side of Christ. They are at peace with His enemies. They have no quarrel with sin. I warn you, this is not Christianity. This is not the way to heaven.

I often fear much for those who hear the gospel regularly. I fear, lest you become so familiar with the sound of its doctrines, that insensibly you become dead to its power. I fear, lest your religion should sink down into a little vague talk about your own weakness and corruption, and a few sentimental expressions about Christ, while real practical fighting on Christ's side is altogether neglected. Oh, beware of this state of mind. 'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only'. No victory--no crown! Fight and overcome! (James 1:22).

Young men and women, and specially those who have been brought up in religious families, I fear much for you. I fear lest you get a habit of giving way to every temptation. I fear lest you become afraid of saying, 'No!' to the world and the devil and, when sinners entice you, think it least trouble to consent. Beware, I do beseech you, of giving way. Every concession will make you weaker. Go into the world resolved to fight Christ's battle, and fight your way on.

Believers in the Lord Jesus, of every church and rank in life, I feel much for you. I know your course is hard. I know it is a sore battle you have to fight. I know you are often tempted to say, 'It is of no use,' and to lay down your arms altogether.

Cheer up, dear brothers and sisters. Take comfort, I entreat you. Look at the bright side of your position. Be encouraged to fight on. The time is short. The Lord is at hand. The night is far spent. Millions as weak as you have fought the same fight. Not one of all those millions has been finally led captive by Satan. Mighty are your enemies, but the Captain of your salvation is mightier still. His arm, His grace and His Spirit shall hold you up. Cheer up. Be not cast down.

What though you lose a battle or two? You shall not lose all. What though you faint sometimes? You shall not be quite cast down. What though you fall seven times? You shall not be destroyed. Watch against sin, and sin shall not have dominion over you. Resist the devil, and he shall flee from you. Come out boldly from the world, and the world shall be obliged to let you go. You shall find yourselves in the end more than conquerors; you shall 'overcome'.

Considering the relevancy of this whole subject, let us look into how this whole doctrine touches upon us in practical terms:

1. For one thing, let me warn all who are living only for the world, to take heed what they are doing. You are enemies to Christ, though you may not know it. He marks your ways, though you turn your back on Him and refuse to give Him your hearts. He is observing your daily life, and reading your daily ways. There will yet be a resurrection of all your thoughts, words and actions. You may forget them, but God does not. You may be careless about them, but they are carefully marked down in the book of remembrance. Oh, worldly man, think of this! Tremble, tremble and repent.

2. Let me warn all formalists and self-righteous people to take heed that they are not deceived. You fancy you will go to heaven because you go regularly to church. You indulge an expectation of eternal life, because you are always at the Lord's table, and are never missing in your pew. But where is your repentance? Where is your faith? Where are your evidences of a new heart? Where is the work of the Spirit? Where are your evidences of regeneration? Oh, formal Christian, consider these questions! Tremble, tremble and repent.

3. Let me warn all careless members of churches to beware lest they trifle their souls into hell. You live on year after year as if there was no battle to be fought with sin, the world and the devil. You pass through life a smiling, laughing, gentleman-like, or lady-like person, and behave as if there was no devil, no heaven and no hell. Oh, careless churchman, or careless Dissenter, careless Episcopalian, careless Presbyterian, careless Independent, careless Baptist, awake to see eternal realities in their true light! Awake and put on the armor of God! Awake and fight hard for life! Tremble, tremble and repent.

4. Let me warn everyone who wants to be saved, not to be content with the world's standard of religion. Surely no man with his eyes open can fail to see that the Christianity of the New Testament is something

far higher and deeper than the Christianity of most professing Christians. That formal, easy-going, do-little thing, which most people call 'religion', is evidently not the religion of the Lord Jesus. The things that He praises in these seven epistles are not praised by the world. The things that He blames are not things in which the world sees any harm. Oh, if you would follow Christ, be not content with the world's Christianity! Tremble, tremble and repent.

5. Lastly, let me warn everyone who professes to be a believer in the Lord Jesus, not to be content with a little religion.

Of all sights in the church of Christ, I know none more painful to my own eyes, than a Christian contented and satisfied with a little grace, a little repentance, a little faith, a little knowledge, a little charity and a little holiness. I do beseech and entreat every believing soul that reads this tract not to be that kind of man. If you have any desires after usefulness, if you have any wishes to promote your Lord's glory, if you have any longings after much inward peace, be not content with a little religion.

Let us rather seek, every year we live, to make more spiritual progress than we have done, to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus; to grow in humility and self-acquaintance; to grow in spirituality and heavenly-mindedness; to grow in conformity to the image of our Lord.

Let us beware of leaving our first love like Ephesus, of becoming lukewarm like Laodicea, of tolerating false practices like Pergamos, of tampering with false doctrine like Thyatira, of becoming half dead, ready to die, Like Sardis.

Let us rather covet the best gifts. Let us aim at eminent holiness Let us endeavor to be like Smyrna and Philadelphia. Let us hold fast what we have already, and continually seek to have more. Let us labor to be unmistakable Christians. Let it not be our distinctive character, that we are men of science, or men of literary attainments, or men of the world, or men of pleasure, or men of business, but 'men of God'. Let us so live that all may see that to us the things of God are the first things, and the glory of God the first aim in our lives, to follow Christ our grand object in time present, to be with Christ our grand desire in time to come.

Let us live in this way, and we shall be happy. Let us live in this way, and we shall do good to the world. Let us live in this way, and we shall leave good evidence behind us when we are buried. Let us live in this way, and the Spirit's word to the churches will not have been spoken to us in vain.

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