

The Piety of Robert Murray M'Cheyne

This evening the subject is the piety of Robert Murray M'Cheyne. I gladly present this. Why? Let me give two reasons. First of all, scripture urges upon Christians a life of piety. When the Scriptures speak of this life of piety, it speaks of it as the life of godliness. For instance, Paul writing to Timothy directs him to exercise Himself unto godliness (1 Tim 4:7), and in the last chapter of that same epistle, he says this: "But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness..." (1 Tim 6:11). In his 2nd Epistle to Timothy, he warns against those who have the form of godliness, but deny the power of it. He is to turn away from such (2 Tim 3:5). True godliness has never been popular, and still today it is not popular. But though it may not be popular, it is necessary. Just as without holiness, so also without godliness no one shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

What do we mean by piety? J.I. Packer defines it as "the practice of Christian personal religion, the worship and service of God and the rendering of reverent obedience to his laws."¹

Secondly, I know of no better example of the life of piety, besides the Lord Jesus and the saints of Old and New Testament, than this man, Robert Murray M'Cheyne. When you read of his life, godliness is so wonderfully pictured on every page after his conversion. Let us see what we can learn from him.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne lived a short life of 29 years, but he came to live the life for which God had made him, to glorify Him. One of the prayers which he was known to pray after he was converted was: "make me as holy as I can be on this side of eternity." This man is a rare example of holiness and zeal in the kingdom of Christ.

¹ J.I. Packer, "Piety," in New Bible Dictionary, J.D. Douglas (Ed.), 3rd edition (Downer's Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1996), p. 928.

M'Cheyne's early years

Robert was born in Edinburgh on May 21, 1813 into a well-to-do family. His father was employed in the legal profession, and moved among the rich and famous. The M'Cheyne family belonged to the Church of Scotland, but there was no true life in their soul, and no earnestness to their religion.²

Robert was an amiable child. His father did not remember him guilty of lying, or of any mean or unworthy action. He would also be a good student. When he was 4 years old, when he was recovering from the measles, he learned the Greek alphabet, and could even form the Greek letters on a slate. Everything that he did, he did it well; he loved to draw pictures, and was quite gifted. But, he was without God. Outwardly, he appeared serious and devout. He did not indulge excessively in sin, but he did not know God in a saving way. He discovered evil passions in his life, but he thought that he could come to control his evil heart in his own strength.

M'Cheyne's Conversion

The turning point in his life came when he was 18 years old. His older brother, David, passed away in his 25th year. Some years before, David had begun to see the vanity of the things of this world and he also began to see the value of the things of eternity. When he saw his younger brother Robert taken up with the world, he was sad and prayed many prayers for him and warned him to seek eternal life. It is a special thing to have a sibling like that. Robert felt that especially after David died. He remembered at times seeing his older brother read his Bible or shutting the closet door to pray, when he was getting ready for some dance or other folly. And, Robert knew that David had something he missed: fellowship with God. When David died, Robert knew that his brother was eternally happy, while he felt extremely unhappy. What effect did this have?

² Cf. L.J Van Valen, "Constrained by his Love: A new biography on Robert Murray McCheyne, translated from Dutch edition @ 1993 by Laurence R. Nicolson (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications), p. 12ff.

Later he wrote that when he lost his loved and loving brother, he began to seek a Brother who cannot die – the elder Brother, the Lord Jesus.³

His brother's death dealt a blow to his worldliness. The world lost its attraction, and he began to seek for the Pearl of great price. He did not give up the world at once, but you find glimpses of the deathblow to his love for the world in his writing. One night he writes, "I hope never to play cards again." Another time he writes, "never visit on a Sunday evening again." Still another time he writes, "absented myself from the dance" which meant he was mocked and then he wrote, "I must try to bear the cross."⁴

In seeking the Saviour, M'Cheyne lamented that there was no one to give him direction that he needed. His brother had died and it was not common to lay your case before a minister. The Lord continued to draw him and he found something that would profit him greatly. He began to read the *Sum of Saving Knowledge* – a supplement to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechism. This work wrought a saving change in him. It spoke of 4 things: First, our woeful condition by nature; Secondly, the remedy provided in Christ Jesus; Thirdly, the outward means appointed to make one partaker of Christ; Fourthly, the blessings which are effectually conveyed.⁵

Blessed by the Holy Spirit, Robert found that he had no other hope than on Jesus Christ alone. He could not rely on his penitence or his convictions, but only on Christ and His blood and righteousness, through whom he found reconciliation with God.

Work in God's Vineyard

Having tasted of the reconciliation with God in Christ, he desired to spend his life in the service of His Master. He wanted to become a preacher of the gospel.

³ Ibid, p. 45ff.

⁴ Andrew Bonar, "The Life of Robert Murray M'Cheyne (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust), 1972, p. 17

⁵ Van Valen, p. 53.

Following his studies for the ministry in Edinburgh, he became an assistant pastor in Larbert in 1835, at the age of 22, where he laboured for 1 year. After that he became a minister in Dundee, a place where 51,000 people lived. Dundee was a place with many factories, steam machines and industry; a place where the gospel was greatly needed. His first impression of this city was that it was a city given to idolatry and hardness of heart... and the people loved to have it so.⁶ He laboured there in love and zeal, preaching the word simply, earnestly and faithfully. Life was short. Souls were of great value and he with that awareness he laboured. The Lord did give some fruit upon his ministry, but he longed to see more fruit, and he prayed for God to revive His church.

A revival sent by God did happen in Dundee, when M'Cheyne was on a trip to Palestine to investigate the condition of the Jews. While he was away, God poured out His Spirit in great measure.⁷ For those months, another young man, William Burns took M'Cheyne's charge and when M'Cheyne came back, he could only thank God for His wonderful deeds. He was filled with gratitude for the labours of Burns. He wrote in a letter to Burns, "My dear brother, I shall never be able to thank you for all your labours among the precious souls committed to me; and what is worse, I can never thank God fully for His kindness and grace, which every day appear to me more remarkable."

Bathed in the love of God

But, let me move to fix the focus for this topic particularly on the piety of M'Cheyne. I would like to look at his piety through the lens of a phrase written by his biographer, Andrew Bonar. He wrote of M'Cheyne that "he needed to be bathed in the love of God."⁸ What did Andrew Bonar mean? This, that M'Cheyne had the desire to be entirely immersed in the knowledge of God's love. Now, this was a practice that M'Cheyne engaged in before he preached to the congregation. M'Cheyne's sermons were not only preached from the pulpit, but by his life. His life after conversion was an open epistle to be read by all.

⁶ Ibid., p. 149.

⁷ Ibid., 197ff.

⁸ Bonar, p. 64.

He needed to be bathed in the love of God because he found so little love to God in his heart, as was the case before he was converted. He wrote, “what a mass of corruption have I been! How great a portion of my life have I spent wholly without God in the world; given up to sense the perishing things around me.... How I polluted it by my hypocrisies, my self-conceits.... How unboundedly was the wild impulse of the heart obeyed.”⁹ Reflecting on the foolishness of the sins of youth, he says, “How many, O Lord, may they be? Summed up in one—ungodliness.”¹⁰

After his conversion, he continued to struggle against sin. When he would be sick, then he sought to discover the plagues of his heart. On one occasion he admits, “I have been too anxious to do great things. The lust of praise has ever been my besetting sin.”¹¹ One day, he confessed that a love of praise defiled his Sabbath day.¹² So he writes on his trip to Israel, “I fear I am not thoroughly humbled. I feel the pride of my heart, and bewail it.”¹³ Shortly after his conversion, he took up the practice of fasting – though he did not find it easy. He did so because he often found himself unfit for devotion.¹⁴

You see, what do you need when you discover your sin? You need to taste the love of God. You do not learn to hate sin unless you know God’s love. Tasting the love of God made him desirous to mortify sin. One time when he was engaged in self-examination he asks, “Is there any sin I wish to retain? Is sin a grief to me, the sudden risings and overcomings thereof especially? Lord, thou knowest all things—thou knowest that I hate sin....”¹⁵ His knowledge of sin was not shallow at all. He knew that the seeds of all sins were in his heart, and what was even more dangerous... that he did not see them. Again, let me ask: what do you need when you discover your sin? What M’Cheyne needed was to think on God’s sinless love.

⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 47.

¹² Ibid., p. 56.

¹³ Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁴ Van Valen, p. 64.

¹⁵ Bonar, p. 52.

While he was studying for the ministry, he became involved in the work of evangelization. Under the influence of Thomas Chalmers, they established the visiting society and they began to visit various neighbourhoods in the city of Edinburgh. What an impression, the slums that he went to, had on him. He writes, "Such scenes I never before dreamed of. Ah! Why am I such a stranger to the poor of my native town? I have passed their doors thousands of times; I have admired the huge black piles of building, with their lofty chimneys breaking the sun's rays. Why have I never ventured within? How dwelleth the love of God in me? How cordial is the welcome even of the poorest and most loathsome to the voice of Christian sympathy! What embedded masses of human beings are huddled together, unvisited by friend or minister! "No man careth for our souls," is written on every forehead. Awake my soul! Why should I give hours and days any longer to the vain world, when there is such a world of misery at my very door? Lord, put thine own strength in me; confirm every good resolution; forgive my past long life of uselessness and folly."¹⁶

Disciplines of Piety

How did he bathe in God's love? First of all by prayer. How he loved to pray! One day we find him early in his closet and he says, "Rose early to seek God, and found him whom my soul loveth. Who would not rise early to meet such company? The rains are over and gone. The rains are over and gone. They that sow in tears shall reap in joy."¹⁷ What he experienced alone he wanted to hold on to and not lose the nearness of the Lord. While in Dundee, he engaged in much visitation in the parish. He began the day with a calm season of private devotion during the morning hours. The walls of his chambers were witnesses of his prayerfulness, Bonar writes. He had a rule for prayer, "he must first see the face of God before he could undertake any duty."¹⁸ He wrote, "I feel it far better to begin with God, to seek His face first, and to get my soul near Him before it is near another." Even on busy Saturdays he would not neglect prayer.

¹⁶ Van Valen, p. 96.

¹⁷ Bonar, p. 30.

¹⁸ Bonar, p. 44.

Also, he would chastise himself if he prayed too little on the Sabbath morning, and says, “must try to get early to bed on Saturdays, that I may ‘rise a great while before the day.’”¹⁹ He became persuaded that he ought never to do anything without prayer, and if possible, special, secret prayer.

On his sermons there could often be found little prayers sketched – sometimes at the beginning of the sermon or at the close of the sermon, he would write, “Master, help; help, Lord, help; send showers; pardon, give the Spirit, and take the glory.”²⁰ A pious man is a praying man; and a praying man is a dependent man. M’Cheyne was such a man.

Secondly, he was a man of the word. Already from his days of seeking the Lord, he was a diligent reader of the word of God. He loved the word of God – and he read it not just in order to deliver sermons, but for the benefit of his own soul. Every morning he would read three chapters of the Bible. He woke at 6:30 and spent 2 hours in prayer and meditation. From 8 till 10 o’clock he devoted his time to family worship and breakfast. He needed to nourish his soul – so he studied the word of God. What would He do on the Lord’s Day evenings? He read the Scriptures.²¹ Where does a Christian get fed? He gets fed in the Scriptures and by the Scriptures.²² He meditated on the Scriptures, seeking to do it day and night. There is an interesting story of M’Cheyne losing his Bible. While in Israel his friend, Andrew Bonar, had accidentally dropped the Bible into the well of Jacob at Sychar, which led M’Cheyne to write a poem. When you hear this poem, you see how the Bible was his companion:²³

My own loved Bible, must I part from thee,
Companion of my toils by land and sea;
Man of my counsels, soother of distress

¹⁹ Bonar, p. 63.

²⁰ Bonar, p. 160.

²¹ Van Valen, p. 157.

²² While in Israel, Bonar records: “it was his delight to search into the Scriptures, just as at home.... At home and abroad he had an insatiable appetite for all the Word.” P. 107.

²³ Bonar, p. 114.

Guide of my steps through this world's wilderness!
In darkest nights, a lantern to my feet;
In gladsome days, as dropping honey sweet.

Thirdly, he was a man of praise. When he would arise in the morning he would first sing a Psalm of praise... to stir up his soul.²⁴ The Psalms could be often heard sung from his room at an early hour.²⁵ In fact, he ensured that the people of Dundee would become better singers, so he saw to it that there were meetings for the improvement of singing, because he said: it is a great shame that Christians did not endeavour to sing the praise of God well.²⁶

He continued to sing. After dinner, he would often sing a Psalm or hymn. Often, it was the Lord's my shepherd, or O that I like a dove had wings. Sometimes it was also a hymn, like "O for a closer walk with thee..."²⁷

Focus in his life

What was the focus of M'Cheyne's life? You see, the life of the natural man has a focus; it seeks after something, something of this world. What was the focus of M'Cheyne's life? What was the focus of his godliness? Maybe a better question is, whom did he focus on? He focused on God Himself. Like Enoch, he sought to walk with God which was his life, his happiness. Bonar could write that especially in his last years M'Cheyne "walked calmly in almost unbroken fellowship with the Father and the Son."²⁸

For the life of godliness to exist and to grow, there must be communion with God in Christ. So, M'Cheyne says, "Happy to be one with Christ! I, a vile worm; He, the Lord my righteousness.... May Christ be all in all to me."²⁹ He

²⁴ Bonar, p. 67.

²⁵ Bonar, p. 44.

²⁶ Kirkwood Hewat, M'Cheyne from the Pew: Extracts from the diary of William Lamb (London: S.W. Portridge & Co., N.D.), p. 98-99.

²⁷ Bonar, p. 172-173.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 97.

wanted to be sure he belonged to Christ and he would ask himself, “Does my heart really close with the offer of salvation by Jesus.”³⁰

He loved Christ. He said, “My heart is all of sin; but Jesus lives.”³¹ Sometimes he felt the near presence of Jesus in his soul and he lived in the blessed consciousness that he was a child of God.³²

What did he do with his sin? He went to Christ and purposed to go to Him for forgiveness of every sin. He said: “I must never think a sin too small to need immediate application to the blood of Christ.” Moreover, he said, “I must not only wash in Christ’s blood, but clothe me in Christ’s obedience. For every sin of omission in self, I may find a divinely perfect obedience ready for me in Christ.”³³

So he resolved to study Christ more in His person and work. “I ought to study Christ as a living Saviour more—as a Shepherd, carrying the sheep he finds—as a King, reigning in and over the souls he has redeemed—as a captain, fighting with those who fight with me.” He also says, “I ought to study Christ as an Intercessor. He prayed for Peter who was to be most tempted. I am on his breastplate. If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million of enemies.”³⁴

In Sum...

So what do we see in the life of M’Cheyne? We see that he pursued holiness, by desiring to be like Christ. His happiness was to gain entire likeness to Christ, so he urged ministers to preach more by their holy and consistent lives than their sermons. Someone once said, regarding what he sought to do, “He thought so much about Christ, and spoke so much about Christ, that the Christ-like image was gradually his.”³⁵ His life was one of eminent holiness.³⁶

³⁰ Ibid., p. 52.

³¹ Ibid., p. 167.

³² Ibid., p. 168-169.

³³ Ibid., p. 176.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 178-179.

³⁵ Hewat, p. 127-129.

³⁶ Edmond Smith writes: “He determined to be as perfect in holiness as it is possible to be on earth, and any voice in his mind telling him the contrary he declared to be of the devil.” *A Tree by a Stream: Unlock the keys of active meditation* (Geonies House, Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1995), p. 141.

At times, it was not the words which he spoke, but the holy manner in which he spoke them, that was the chief means of arresting sinners. He knew that one idle word, one needless contention, one covetous act could destroy the effect of many a solemn exhortation and earnest warning, and so he sought to be circumspect in his every-day walk. Every possible moment, his desire was to enjoy the presence of God.³⁷ After M'Cheyne died, there was an unopened letter which was written after he preached his last sermon, and in it were found written these words: "I heard you preach last Sabbath evening, and it pleased God to bless that sermon to my soul. It was not so much what you said as your manner of speaking that struck me. I saw in you a beauty of holiness that I never saw before."³⁸

Lessons from his piety

I would like to propose some lessons to be learned from this brief study on the piety of M'Cheyne. The first lesson is the necessity of piety. When you study the life of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, godliness and piety was no unnecessary add-on. It is possible that many of us have heard of M'Cheyne and have read some things of M'Cheyne. If you were to ask someone who knows a little bit of M'Cheyne, what do they think of when regarding this man? Surely, they would mention his godliness and holiness. Can you imagine M'Cheyne without this life of godliness? No. Why is that? Because, godliness belongs to being a Christian. We don't only need to draw the conclusion from his life, but the scriptures tell us. Think for instance of 2 Peter 3:11-12, there we find Peter (inspired by the Holy Spirit) writing: "seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?" What manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness? The life of godliness is commended as necessary: ought ye to be!

³⁷ Bonar, p. 88.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 187.

Why? For one reason because the Lord Jesus is coming again and the things of this world are going to be melted with fervent heat. A second reason is because the more godliness, the more happiness. The more godliness, the more comfort in life and death. Thirdly, because He is worthy of our love and service.

Second lesson: our day is a day of a low level of piety. The Christian church is not pursuing after godliness, but in so many ways after worldliness. Do I need to give any examples? How little Sabbath observances there is in the Christian church. By and large, the 4th commandment is set aside; the service of the Lord is set aside for man's pleasures, man's thoughts, man's speech. How many examine themselves after a Sabbath to see how the Sabbath has profited them?

Can this level of holiness be seen in the members of the Christian church? What if we restrict ourselves to those who call themselves Christians?

M'Cheyne pursued godliness at every turn. He did not wish to be godly simply before the faces of men, but before the face of God. Do we pursue godliness at every hour in every place, in all our thoughts, in all that we do? Godliness was something that flowed from M'Cheyne. Will our younger generation excel their parents in godliness? Will they strive after more holiness than our fathers? Will the level of piety sink lower, or will there be a shift to more godliness?

So the 3rd lesson, but in the form of a question: how is this piety acquired? It must flow from a heart that has been changed; it grows where grace has changed the heart. When Robert was younger, he appeared serious and devout. He did not indulge excessively into sin. He hated certain sins. Many would have mistaken him for a godly young man but he was not converted. His heart was still in the world, and that needed to be changed. It was changed by the grace of God, when he was united to the Lord Jesus Christ. Sometimes people think that they are pious even when they are unconverted but that cannot be. Should that be a reason to indulge of sin? Not at all. But, as long as we are not united to Christ, there is no true godliness – we may have the form of godliness, but we miss the true life of godliness. Are you united to the Lord? Are you a godly

young person? Do you know grace? Do you seek it? Do you need it? If it is right, then you need it now, but also every day.

M'Cheyne's death

During his years of ministry M'Cheyne had experienced bouts of sickness and weakness; also times of health and strength. He continued to preach, lead communion services, help in evangelistic tours in different places. On March 12, 1843 he preached his last three sermons to his congregation. One on Hebrews 9:15 – and for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament. In the afternoon he preached on Romans 9:22-23 dealing with the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction, addressing the unconverted. The last sermon he preached on Isaiah 60:1 “Arise, shine for thy light hath come.”³⁹

The following night there was a meeting concerning the church crisis – a split was now more unavoidable in the Church of Scotland. When he arrived home he felt shivery and sick. He got a violent headache and could not sleep all night. The next day his condition deteriorated, but he went to officiate at a wedding of a young couple. After the ceremony, a little girl came up to him with a flower: “will oo put this in oor coat? She asked. O yes, my dear, replied M'Cheyne, but you must help me. So the child pinned the flower to a hole in his jacket. “Now I have done what you wished; will you do what I would like?” yes, answer the girl. Well, I wish you to listen to the story of the Good Shepherd who gave himself for the sheep. When he began to narrate the story to her, 5 or 6 other children gathered around him. They listened intently – and he told them lovingly and simply of the Saviour who sought out the lost sheep.⁴⁰

When he arrived home, he felt deathly sick. A violent fever racked his body. He walked to his doctor to inform him. The doctor brought him back to the manse and he became bound to his bed.⁴¹ The congregation was informed, and it became a matter for earnest prayer that the Lord would spare him. He prayed also for them as he could. One time when he had a violent fever, he was heard

³⁹ Van Valen, p. 413.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 415.

⁴¹ Ibid.

to have said: “This parish, Lord; this people; this whole place! Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom thou hast given me.” On another occasion he prayed without ceasing for two hours for his congregation. He prayed especially for the unconverted. Another time he said to his nurse: Be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain the Lord. Then he turned to speak of the problems of the church. He said: I don’t think much of policy in church courts; no, I hate it; but I’ll tell you what I like – faithfulness to God and a holy walk.⁴²

On March 25, 1843, he was taken out of this life. Just before his death, he raised his hands in the air – as if to pronounce a blessing. Then he passed away to be with His Lord.⁴³ So he departed to the grief of the congregation – to his joy, and God’s glory. Why should we seek a life of godliness? To live well – and to die well – to the praise of God.

⁴² Ibid., p. 418-419.

⁴³ Van Valen, p. 420.