

The Christian and Recreation

By Dr Frank McClelland

In our last issue we had a brief article on the "Christian and Work." It is a matter of practical Christianity where the inward change will be seen in the outward behaviour. The correct attitude to secular employment has given rise among believers to what is often known as 'the Protestant Work Ethic.'

In that, idleness is a sin and industry a virtue. But the old saying is true, "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." We are human beings. We have bodies. Many of today's occupations are sedentary where the brain is exercised but the body is not. There is a lot of stress in the modern world and there is a need for rest, relaxation and recreation. Jesus said to His sorely stressed disciples, "*Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place and rest awhile.*" [Mark 6:31]

Perhaps, having looked at the "Christian and Work," now would be a good time to consider a companion subject, the "Christian and Recreation."

THE NEED FOR RECREATION

Recreation is defined as "the act of refreshing one's self or of renewing one's strength after toil." The recreation can be mental or physical. It can be by passive rest or by active exertion.

The well-known American artist, Norman Rockwell, captured the difference in one of his portrayals of everyday life in the United States. One was a painting of the backyards of two adjoining houses.

In one, owned by a man whose job was clerical, the garden was immaculate with its owner busying about, mowing the lawn, sweating profusely and tending endlessly to the physical needs of his garden. To him that was his recreation.

The other garden was a mess with the grass uncut, the weeds growing and the happy and totally

unconcerned owner relaxing on the porch with a book. His daytime job was manual and his relaxation was mental. After a hard day's physical labour nothing was more refreshing than to forget physical exertion for a while. (It would have been interesting to hear the comments of the respective wives)!

C.H. Spurgeon highlighted the need of ministerial students to take time for recreation. In his excellent 'Lectures to My Students' he quoted Burton, in his "Anatomy of Melancholy, said, "Students are negligent of their bodies. Other men look to their tools: a painter will wash his pencils; a smith will look to his hammer, anvil, forge; a husbandman will mend his plough irons, and grind his hatchet if it be dull.....only scholars neglect that instrument (their brain and spirits I mean) which they daily use. Well saith Lucan, 'See thou twist not the rope so hard that it break.'"

There is a lot of truth in the old adage, "a healthy body leads to a healthy mind." By extension, a healthy mind and body cannot but aid the spiritual.

The Creator rested after His labours in Genesis [2:1-2]. The Saviour rested betimes. [Matthew 14:23 and John 6:15]. His exhortation to His disciples was "*Come ye yourselves apart and rest a while.*" And as is often added, if we do not "*come apart and rest*" we will come apart at the seams of our life.

THE NATURE OF RECREATION

Recreation means different things to different people, as seen in Rockwell's gardens illustration. There is a multitude of ways to recreate from doing nothing to heavy physical exercise.

The main thought, however, in today's society is bodily exercise. Someone will quickly point out that Paul said, "*bodily exercise profiteth*

little: but godliness is profitable unto all things." [1 Timothy 4:8]. The correct meaning, of course, is "for a little time," that is, our time on earth. So bodily exercise is profitable during our earthly sojourn.

Paul is there teaching priorities. The vital principle is godliness first. There is a danger today, in our sports oriented world, of placing undue emphasis on recreation to the neglect of the soul's welfare.

SOME NOTES ON RECREATION

It would be impossible to answer every question on the rights and wrongs of recreation. Rather we shall give some guidelines by which you can judge your attitude.

As a young boy I was a motorcycle racing fanatic. Walking along a country road near our home we were met by a local pastor who seemed a kindly enough man. When he heard of my interest he told me sternly that if the Lord came back and found me at a motorcycle race I would "drop into hell." (Sadly, he was later involved in adultery with disastrous results but we did not return in kind).

A modern problem is that most of today's sports are not in the Bible (although there is always the wag to tell you about tennis in the Bible – Joseph served on Pharaoh's court).

Paul, in his epistles illustrates spiritual truth using sport, as in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. He speaks of running, boxing and athletics. He would hardly illustrate from something that is condemned.

We shall lay down some broad principles and the reader must decide for himself, either as a participant or spectator, whether such is a good Christian practice.

Get the priorities right. We are to seek first the kingdom of God. A soul that is right with God is of paramount importance. It is nice to

have a healthy body but many an emaciated and neglected soul lives in an outwardly healthy body.

Recreation follows labour not the other way round. The disciples were working when Jesus called upon them to “*rest awhile.*” After a hard day’s toil, rest and relaxation are a tonic to the mind and body but R and R before work is unprofitable.

Don’t leave the Lord out. Jesus said to His disciples “*come*” not “*go.*” Their relaxation was to be with Him and not away from Him. The tendency can be, when going on even a well-earned vacation, to leave the Lord at home.

Some of the sweetest times of spiritual refreshment are when, freed from the hustle and bustle of modern 21st. century life for a while, we can spend our vacation rejoicing in the Lord and His goodness to us. The presence of Jesus will make it a holiday to remember.

Can you ask the Lord’s blessing upon your recreational endeavour?

The story is told of the Puritan William Romaine, rector of Blackfriars in London and an acquaintance of George Whitefield. Romaine, so the story goes, was invited to the home of a wealthy lady. After a beautiful meal she said to the assembled company that they would “play some cards.”

Romaine waited until all was ready and the cards were dealt. Then he asked if they could ask the Lord’s blessing to which she replied, “we don’t ask the Lord’s blessing upon playing cards.” His gracious answer cut to the heart of the matter, “Madam, if we cannot ask God’s blessing upon playing cards perhaps we ought not to be doing that.”

There is little need for further commentary. Can you ask the Lord’s blessing upon your passive or active recreational endeavours? “If in doubt, don’t” is a wise piece of advice in this case.”

If the Lord came back today would you be “caught up” or “caught on?” The point made to me by the pastor mentioned earlier, while harshly put, was a valid one.

Jesus Christ is coming back again and that return has never, in the history of man, been nearer. Would His return be greeted by us with joy or would we be hiding in embarrassment like Adam and Eve because we were caught on doing something that we know we ought not to be doing? Keep that thought in mind the next time you are contemplating going somewhere, or doing something questionable.

Does your recreational preference yoke you into bad company?

‘Birds of a feather stick together.’ It is strange when professing believers seem to prefer the company of the ungodly. The Christian is in the world but not of the world. One would assume that in recreational times the company of God’s people would be sought out rather than the worldling. We have to interface all the time with a world that is generally hostile to Christianity so one assumes that when a choice of company can be made the Christian would gravitate to those of “*like precious faith.*”

Recreational activities should not be on the Lord’s Day.

Keeping the Sabbath is not a command of either the *ceremonial* law, which has been abrogated, or the *civil* law that had particular emphasis on the nation of Israel. The Sabbath is part of the *moral* law which is still binding upon God’s people, not to save but a code of ethics to be obeyed.

Sadly, much sporting activity is on the Lord’s Day and even Christians have succumbed to its transgression. The writer was preaching in North America at a church of another denomination. The morning service was characterized by a sense of the Lord’s presence. But he was disappointed when after lunch in the

manse the pastor spent the rest of the afternoon watching the football game on TV – hardly good spiritual preparation for the forthcoming evening service.

The Lord’s Day is to be a day of rest with the focus on the heavenly and spiritual over the earthly and carnal. Some will recall God’s blessing on Eric Liddell who refused to compete in his Olympic race in Paris because it was on a Sunday.

Our recreation should not expose our bodies to undue danger.

This is the age of extreme sports and young people boast of ‘no fear.’ Perhaps ‘no sense’ would be more accurate. The Christian is to present his body “*a living sacrifice*” not a dead or a damaged one. [Romans 12:1]

We must be careful not to make a god out of our recreation.

Sport has dramatically changed over the past fifty years. In earlier times sports were played by amateurs and could be called sport. Now it is big business with teams working on multi-million dollar budgets. For example, a baseball pitcher can be paid \$5000 every time he throws the ball whether it be fair or foul. People by the millions are caught up in the advertising hype. Christians have to ensure that their love of sport does not develop into a mania that ousts the Lord.

The definition of a sportsman is “one who can take loss or defeat without complaint, or victory without gloating, and who treats his opponents with fairness, generosity and courtesy.” There are not too many true sportsmen today.

RECREATION OF THE SOUL

Physical recreation is optional but spiritual re-creation is vital. The best recreation is to get alone with the Lord; meditate on His creative greatness and redemptive mercy. From such communion we come away refreshed with renewed energy for the battle for truth. □