

THEOLOGY OF WORK No. 9

“Leisure”

May 28, 2006

Review

We have been talking about our working lives as Christians, our occupations, these Sunday evenings. We have argued that the Bible teaches Christians to see their work as a service rendered directly to God and as an instrument through which God’s blessing comes to us. We have found in the Bible a double perspective on work, one deriving from creation and the other from the fall. Work is, in the Bible, at one and the same time a futility and a fulfillment, a frustration and a satisfaction, a problem and a solution and *our* work will be and must be always both at the same time. Then we considered the Bible’s ethics of work: its specific teaching regarding the moral obligations that govern the working life. We looked at the obligations of the worker or employee and then those of the employer, boss, or supervisor. We found that the cardinal principle in both cases was that employers and employees are always to consider themselves as working ultimately for the Lord and so are always to work in that way that pleases *him*. Finally we are considering some of the cases of conscience, the ethical issues that are thrown up by our working life. We have so far considered the questions of workaholism – when are we working too much? – and the difficulties posed by our associations and partnerships with unbelievers in our working life.

Before going on this evening to the next issue related to our working life, I wanted to say a word about a matter that people can feel quite strongly about, though it perhaps bears more on the way we think about life and about ourselves than it bears directly on our working lives *per se*. I am speaking of the way in which it is quite customary in our society to refer to people and, in some respects, to evaluate them, by the nature of the work that they do. In other words, many people seem to attach some personal significance to the nature of one’s occupation. Perhaps this is more true for men than for women, but it is something we have all felt and encountered. When one meets a person it is often not very long before we ask “what do you do?” – by which, of course, we mean: what is your occupation? – as if that piece of information is particularly important and revealing. We find out what a person does and then our opinions follow, perhaps often below the level of our conscious reflection. We evaluate, we measure the person according to how responsible his position is, how much power he wields, how much money he makes, how difficult his job is, and so on. In other words, it seems that one’s work often *defines* a person. Certain jobs are called “the professions” – medicine, law, teaching, for example – because they are callings that require specialized knowledge and, often, long and intensive academic preparation. As a result, in Western culture, there has been a certain prestige that attaches to such occupations and so to the people who have them. Sometimes people, especially people who do not have such occupations, take real offense at the idea of being “defined” by their occupations.

Well, it will not surprise you to hear me say that there is, in Holy Scripture, a *dialectic* about this also. There is an artless recognition that certain occupations are more weighty than others. There is a great deal more in the Bible about kings than about farmers and we learn a great deal more about the life and work of some of the apostles than we do about the very many more

ordinary Christians who populated the churches of the apostolic era. The Bible is not an egalitarian book. Heaven itself is not an egalitarian place: there are angels and there are archangels; have always been, will always be! I find it very interesting and true to life, for example, that in that long list of his friends and acquaintances that Paul gives us in Romans 16, only one man's occupation is listed and it happens to be Erastus, who was the director of public works in Corinth. Erastus, in other words, was a prominent man holding a position of considerable prestige. It was natural for Paul to mention that man's occupation. I say again, the Bible is not an egalitarian book. You do not find in the Bible the fear that one believer might be seen to occupy a higher position than another. In our day in the church, we hear people take real offense at someone's drawing attention to a person's accomplishments or the prestige of his job as if there were some kind of assault on the gospel of free grace. I have heard people speak this way myself. I was at a graduation ceremony for a Christian educational institution not long ago and the master of ceremonies was virtually apologizing for the fact that they were noting and, in some cases, rewarding with scholarships and prizes, some of the students who had distinguished themselves. He was uncomfortable with the fact that some students were more accomplished than others and attention was being drawn to that fact. He virtually said that the spirit of the gospel was hard to reconcile with such a practice. But the fact is that the Bible is always drawing attention to a believer's accomplishments and the Lord promises to reward him for those accomplishments. And the Bible often and in different ways elevates some above others in respect to their place in the world.

On the other hand, a great many others are listed by name in Romans 16 without their occupations and Paul says some wonderfully appreciative things about a number of them, more, in fact, than he says about Erastus. What is more, James explicitly warns us – as do other Biblical writers – about a worldly kind of favoritism that pays too much deference to worldly considerations: money, power, prestige, and the like. It is perfectly clear in the Bible both that there are no little people in the kingdom of God and that what makes a man or woman great in the kingdom of God is not his job or his reputation or his prestige but his faith and his godliness. What, after all, does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul? We want, therefore, neither to be so insecure that we take offense at the attention paid to others – that is hardly a gospel spirit – nor so worldly that we faun over those who are great in the way that the world measures greatness. That is enough about that. Now we move on to tonight's subject.

Tonight I want to deal with *the issue of leisure*, of recreation as the counterpart of work and employment. It is a subject of great importance in our recreation and entertainment mad culture, but one about which Christians often do not think often and deeply enough. We live in a culture that worships play and we play, whether in outdoor activities, in sports – whether as participants or spectators – or in television and movie watching, more than any people in the history of the world has ever played! We hear all the time about the “entertainment industry” and it is a large industry indeed. Hardly any people on the face of the planet through the whole course of its history have ever spoken of an *entertainment industry*. But that is some measure of the place that leisure has assumed in our modern life. Indeed, the only similar extravagant interest in play like that of our modern world was that of the ancient Roman world in the period of its decadence and decay.

The Presbyter Salvian, describing the fall of Trier in the last days of the Roman Empire, tells us that men did not defend the city because they were too interested in the games at the arena. After the rape, looting, and burning of Trier, the survivors petitioned the emperor to rebuild their arena so that the games could go on and their morale improved! Salvian said of Rome: ‘it is dying, but continues to laugh.’

Juvenal, the second century Roman satirist, said that the Romans, once rulers of the world, had come to care for nothing but handouts and spectacles and that *panem et circenses* – bread and circuses – were the favorite formula for Roman emperors who wanted to keep the allegiance of the masses. How different is it really in our day? We have two new stadiums in Seattle that together cost nearly a billion dollars. The hot topic in Seattle politics today concerns the basketball arena and the fear that the city might lose the Supersonics. We have cable television industries, the movie rental industry, the boating and RV industries, movie theaters by the dozens, internet sites devoted to everything else besides work, and so on. And we who are Christians, the children of God in this world, are a part of that culture and participants in its concentration on entertainment.

Our worship of play is demonstrated in the time and money we devote to it, the emotional investment we make in it. Perhaps the perfect illustration of the modern world’s devotion to play and leisure is the recent development of fantasy leagues. Hundreds of thousands of Americans now create imaginary games and devote serious attention to the fortunes of their imaginary teams. It is, in a way, the *reduction ad absurdum* of an entertainment mad culture. We are now creating new entertainments out of our old ones, spinning out new ways of enjoying our leisure, as if we hadn’t enough already.

We are, of course, all well aware of other striking illustrations of the place that entertainment has assumed in our culture. The devotion paid to athletics is reflected in our language. Terms like “soccer mom” and “football widow” are now staples of our vocabulary. I spoke at a conference in the autumn a few years ago in Alabama. It was scheduled over a long weekend and Lord’s Day, but, I was told, the most important factor in determining the date was the schedule of the Alabama and Auburn football teams. American athletes are now, by far, the highest paid salaried employees in the economy. The salaries of the chief executives of the world’s largest companies do not compare (though they may have the opportunity to earn more with stock options and other forms of compensation). Nowadays the economic effect of college and professional sports is significant enough both to provoke systemic corruption and to entice politicians to seek a share of the pie. And, of course, the attention devoted to the leisure world in the media both demonstrates and enlarges the place of entertainment in modern life. Television programs are now regularly devoted to television programs and stars – entertainment about entertainment – and there are any number of magazines, newspaper sections, and internet sites that are filled with information and gossip about the celebrities of the sports and entertainment worlds.

A recent article in the *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan 6, 2006), the trade journal of American higher education, written by Mark Bauerlein, an English professor at Emory University, detailed the bad news. The average American college student – that’s *college student* – watches 3 hours and 41 minutes of television each day. That is in addition to the hours that

millions of them spend each day on their own or others' internet blogs, chatting on their cell phones, or sending text messages. At Indiana University's Bloomington campus, a survey found that half of all students spent four hours or less *per week* preparing for class!

Though they were taught many things in high school, a great many, if not most American high school graduates do not remember what they are taught, but they have fixed in their minds the data of the entertainment world in which they live, move, and have their being. So, while 64% knew the name of the latest American idol, only 10% could name the current speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Only 28% could identify William Rehnquist as the then chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, only 39% knew which party had the most members in Congress, and 25% could not identify Dick Cheney as vice president. Though they have incredibly precise knowledge of popular music, celebrities, sports and fashion, of the college *seniors* surveyed at the top 55 American colleges (whatever that means!), only 19% scored a C or higher in a test measuring knowledge of American history; only 29% knew what "Reconstruction" referred to in American history, only 1/3 knew who the American general was at Yorktown, only 1 in 50 could name the first right guaranteed in the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution, and 25% could not name any of the freedoms protected in the Bill of Rights. In a similar survey, the same college students who knew all about the world of television and sport, knew very little about the world. 39% of 18-24 year olds surveyed failed the Global Geographic Literacy Survey. Only 13% could find Iraq on a map; only 12% could identify Afghanistan; only 51% could find New York State. More remarkable still, 29% could not identify the Pacific Ocean! The average college student could identify only 2.5 countries in Europe. 30% thought that the U.S. had a population of one to two billion residents. A great deal of what these college students thought they knew about politics and the world situation they had gleaned from television shows such as Saturday Night Live and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

Our college students today are the dumbest generation in American history. They aren't less intelligent, less able – they know many things – but they know much less about what has always been thought important for college students to know. "Why hasn't their knowledge level kept pace? In part, because of the new leisure habits of teens and young adults," says Prof. Bauerlein. "...the more time young adults devote to activities like sending e-mail messages [and watching television], the less time they devote to books, the arts, politics, and their studies." The world of entertainment and leisure has become their world to a far greater degree than was the case with any previous generation.

And in the culture as a whole, this means that more and more work, our occupations, must become simply a means to the entertainment, leisure end. We work so as to be able to play.

Now, as you would expect, the Scripture has two messages to give to us about leisure and play.

- I. *The Bible certainly does not condemn sports or entertainment per se, but rather accepts it as proper in its place and in a right measure.*

Think, for example of Paul's remark in 1 Tim 4:8 to the effect that "physical training is of some value." It has much less value than training in godliness, to be sure, but Paul was certainly not anti-sports – either the playing of them or the watching of them. Think, for example, of the number of positive athletic metaphors he employs in his description of the Christian life. He

likens the Christian to a boxer in training (1 Cor. 9:26), to a runner running a race (Gal. 2:2; 2 Tim. 4:7), and, perhaps, to a wrestler in a match (Eph. 6:12; *πάλη* usually denotes a wrestling match). He even refers to gladiatorial contests (1 Cor. 4:9) – though not in the most positive way – and, possibly, to chariot races (Phil. 3:13-14; cf. Lightfoot, *ad loc*). In any case, Paul makes liberal use of what were the great entertainments of the Roman imperial world. Other biblical writers do as well (e.g. Hebrews 12:1).

And, though much of our modern entertainment was unknown in the ancient world, the Lord refers to childhood games (Luke 7:32: in the market place the children call out to each other, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance...”). And, of course, we know the attention paid in the Bible to holidays, to feasting, and to good cheer. The Bible, as it is a book of work and workers, it is also a book of resters and feasters.

The Puritans, who were supposed to be such dour and cheerless folks, actually were very willing to play and to enjoy sports and recreations and thought that they were, as well, part of a biblically shaped lifestyle. The fact that they took a strong stand against any sports on the Lord’s Day and that they categorically rejected certain games or sports – such as gambling, cock-fighting, and bear-baiting – led many to the assumption that they were spoil-sports and had a negative opinion about all forms of recreation. But that is clearly a blunder and does not at all accurately describe either their thinking or their practice.

One of them, William Burkitt wrote:

“It being impossible for the mind of man to be always intent upon business, and for the body to be exercised in continual labors, the wisdom of God has therefore adjudged some diversion or recreation...to be both needful and expedient A wise and good man...is forced to...choose such recreations as are healthful, short, recreative, and proper, to refresh both mind and body.” [Cited in Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 189]

In 1647, when the Puritans were in control of the English government, an act was passed making the second Tuesday of every month a holiday for the purpose of recreation. Many of the Puritans spoke wisely and commonsensically about the importance of recreation as a diversion for the mind and a renewal of the body. They thought recreation and leisure a means of renewing concentration on one’s work. John Milton, for example, spoke of the

“need of some delightful intermissions, wherein the enlarged soul...may keep her holidays to joy and harmless pastime.” [Ryken, 191]

It is true that, in typical Puritan style, they were perhaps overzealous about regulating our approach to recreation. Richard Baxter in his *A Christian Directory*, after approving of recreation and sport in principle, lays down 18 rules by which to determine which recreation is allowable and which is not!

There is not, to be sure, very much in the Bible about recreation. There is nothing in Holy Scripture which could be taken as an explicit command to play games and sports, but the Bible

clearly leaves room for them and makes statements which seem to provide broadly for their justification (e.g. “a cheerful heart is good medicine” Prov. 17:22). *One thing we cannot say* is that recreation and leisure, according to the Word of God, are major aims of godly living, the purpose for which we work, or a substantial part of the meaning of life!

II. But, if the Bible leaves room for sports and recreation, it also warns us very explicitly about the love of pleasure and about the power of pleasure to steal the heart away from the love of God.

We are, after all, when talking about games and sports, talking about a form of earthly pleasure. We find ourselves so drawn to these things either for the fun they are in themselves, or for the pleasures of other kinds which they bring (society, fame, recognition, etc.).

Think of the way in which the Bible speaks of the love of and pursuit of pleasure. Paul says that “the widow who lives for pleasure is dead, even while she lives,” [1 Tim. 5:6] a chilling statement in a day such as ours! He describes the rebellion of man against God in terms of men being “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” [2 Tim. 3:4] as if the one were *ipso facto* the reverse of the other. And, of course, there is much more of that sort in Holy Scripture.

So what are we to think about leisure, recreation, entertainment and sports? Well, in conclusion, let me elaborate the warning this evening, on the assumption that many more of us need that in our day, that we need the encouragement to enjoy refreshing entertainments. For all the good that we may say about these diverting and refreshing and, sometimes, healthy entertainments, there is a dark side. There are real problems and serious dangers that attach to the pursuit of entertainment of all kinds by Christians. Let me mention them.

1. First, such pursuit consumes large quantities of time. The Bible is always stressing the importance of redeeming the time. We have very little of it in this world and the time we have when we are young is in some respects the most important, because it determines what and how much we can do when we are older and how well we can do it. No one with a Christlike mind can surrender large blocks of time to what is of comparatively little value (1 Tim 4:8) and no Christian young person should get in the habit of doing so.
2. Second, modern entertainments of all kinds have the tendency to arouse impure passions. This too should be an issue for Christians. And I’m not speaking simply of sexual temptation such as might be found in a rented movie or on the internet. Let’s be clear about the evil of *that!* But there are other passions that should be a matter of concern to Christians, perhaps especially to Christian men. Of all the periods of church history, only the first few centuries after Pentecost were like our own in the passion of a culture for sports. The Roman world was sports-mad in many ways just as ours is today. But the Christian church responded to the worship of sports in its day very differently than has ours.

They frowned on involvement with the organized sports of the day and not because they were run by pagans. Tertullian was speaking about attending sporting events as spectators, but he could just as well have been speaking of participation in them: ‘they excite all sorts of

wild and impure passions, anger, fury, and lust; while the spirit of Christianity is a spirit of meekness, peace, and purity.’ [Schaff, vol 2, p 342]

You may remember Augustine’s tragic-comic account of his friend Alypius in the *Confessions*. This was before either young man was a Christian and Augustine feared for his friend’s career because of “his fatal passion for the circus.” [trans. Chadwick, 99] He means the gladiatorial games, violent, cruel, and extreme as they were. Alypius had become something of an addict; a fanatic we would say. Augustine had persuaded his friend to become a Manichee as he was and to swear off attending the games (this was the equivalent of a life-long Red Sox fan promising never to listen to, watch, or attend a game again). But it happened that once, on his way back to his place from dinner, Alypius met some friends and, despite his refusal and resistance, they used some friendly violence to take him to the amphitheater. Alypius said to his friends, “If you drag my body to that place and sit me down there, do not imagine you can turn my mind and my eyes to those spectacles. I shall be as one not there, and so I shall overcome both you and the games.” They took him along with them, perhaps, Augustine says, to find out if he could really pull it off.

“When they arrived and had found seats where they could, the entire place seethed with the most monstrous delight in the cruelty. He kept his eyes shut and forbade his mind to think about such fearful evils. Would that he had blocked his ears as well! A man fell in combat. A great roar from the entire crowd struck him with such vehemence that he was overcome with curiosity. Supposing himself strong enough to despise whatever he saw and to conquer it, he opened his eyes. He was struck in the soul by a wound graver than the gladiator in his body, whose fall had caused the roar. The shouting entered by his ears and forced open his eyes.... As soon as he saw the blood, he at once drank in savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted. He imbibed madness.... He was not now the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined, and a true member of the group which had brought him.” [101]

Augustine knew the power of sport and entertainment to arouse uncommon passion even before he was a Christian. It unmans people. It takes away their self-control. And everyone who plays and watches sports knows this is a true description of things. It has a great power to excite sin: whether anger on the golf course at a shot gone wrong, or at an opponent on the football or soccer field. The only time I can remember actually taking a swing at another person with the intention of hitting him was during a soccer game!

In our culture we tout sports as character building, but it is rarely so and usually it is character corrupting, pandering as it does to egoism. I know of a successful Christian high school soccer coach in Pennsylvania who did not allow his players to make sliding tackles because, though legal, they were too likely to cause injury and provoke anger. He also required his players to congratulate the other team when they scored. He won the state tournament but eventually left coaching because he felt that the negative pressure on character was simply too great to counteract. Look at any gathering of men in their 20s and 30s playing a sport and observe how obviously it is an “ego thing.” It would be hilarious if it weren’t so embarrassing.

Or think of the way in which sinful passions lead to sinful behavior, so readily excused because it is connected to competitive sports. Consider the whining about or criticizing referees and umpires. Did Christ mean turn the other cheek and bless and curse not except when it might make you look bad in front of others or affect the fortunes of the team you root for? And these are just some of the ways in which entertainments arouse passions in a sinful way.

A wife is right to complain when her husband seems to care so much more about other things – his entertainments or his job – than he cares about her. But may we not see the Lord in the same light? What does he think when our pleasures arouse our interest and our passion more than he does?

The Lord is not a spoil-sport, but he leaves us in no doubt that our lives are very much more than pleasure and entertainment, that our time must be spent primarily in higher pursuits, and entertainment and leisure must remain always and only a small part, an incidental part of our daily living. Is it so? Be sure it is so.