

Faith and works in daily life: leisure*

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LEISURE TIME is the time we have when we can *choose* how to occupy ourselves. Much of life does not fall into that category, since large chunks of our time are swallowed up by essentials like sleeping, earning our daily bread, and travelling to and from a place of work; not things which we regard as especially spiritual, but which are unfortunately prerequisites to accomplishing anything else. If we stop doing these things, life as we know it becomes impossible. Beyond that, our circumstances diverge widely, depending on a host of issues; but we all have things we are responsible for, and which will not get done unless we ourselves do them. We do not consider them the most important things in the life of a disciple, but generally we find them the most pressing, and in that sense we have to try and prioritise them as best we can.

Leisure time is not like that, however. Our leisure hours are those in which we can decide what to do, rather than the decision being made for us. Such time can feel exceedingly rare, if (for example) most of the day is taken up getting the kids ready for school then cleaned up again later, trying to keep the house from falling apart, and putting the next meal on the table. Yet generally speaking it is still true that we have more leisure time at our disposal than any generation in the past. There are more labour-saving devices than ever before (though whether filling and emptying a dishwasher actually saves much labour is another question!), and typical working hours are undoubtedly much shorter than, say, a hundred years ago, when a thirty-five-hour week—never mind a fortnight’s holiday in the sun—was something most workers could only dream of.

The Biblical concept of leisure

The word ‘leisure’ occurs not at all in most Bible translations, although we do find it just once in the AV (Mk. 6:31) in the context of the Lord and his disciples being so busy seeing to the needs of others that they did not have time even to grab a bite to eat. (We might ask ourselves when we were last that busy.) A concordance helps us with

the component parts of the Greek word used here: ‘well’, and ‘a period of time’. This word translated “leisure”, therefore, conveys not so much the idea of taking a break from something (least of all from following Christ, a notion utterly absent from Scripture), but simply of having a sufficient measure of time to achieve a particular objective.

The other two verses using the same word reinforce the point. The Corinthians would have to wait till Apollos “has opportunity” (1 Cor. 16:12) to visit them once his existing commitments were fulfilled; and the Athenians used to “spend their time” (Acts 17:21) discussing nothing except the latest novelties picked up in the market place. So, whilst Biblical occurrences of this word are not quite how we usually think of leisure, they do illustrate well a feature of human life, namely, that we generally find time for the things of greatest importance to us.

If as disciples of Christ we claim that following him is the most important thing in life, then what we do when we *can* choose how to spend our time will be heavily influenced by spiritual concerns and the principles we have discerned from the Word of God. It is in the ordinary things of life that the faith we have is revealed, for, as other articles in this issue show, the works we produce are a direct consequence of the faith we have acquired. If we are not using our leisure time in ways which honour the Lord, then presumably pleasing our Master is not as high on our list of priorities as we might claim.

Any leisure time that a disciple might have, therefore, is surely not simply an opportunity for self-indulgence—as if we do what we must for Christ while we have to, but turn to things we would rather be doing as soon as we get the chance. This is perhaps the first important point to be made about our leisure time: in *all* that we do we should be able to say that Christ could condone our actions, even accompany us, and we

* Quotations from the NASB online version unless stated otherwise.

should be motivated by a desire to please God even on the occasions when we are not directly engaged in His work.

The place of recreation in our lives

In leading a balanced and healthy life, one in which we can most be of service to our heavenly Father and our fellow disciples, there is nevertheless a place for what we might call leisure or recreation; time spent doing things which benefit us physically and mentally and which therefore contribute towards our overall wellbeing. If we are able to fill that slot completely with commitments to ecclesial life (for example), always finding the refreshment we need in such activities, then we are fortunate indeed. Realistically, however, our bodies are not always equipped to tell the difference between paid employment and work in the Master's vineyard, and we have all seen amongst our brethren and sisters (and perhaps even experienced ourselves) instances of 'burn-out', when the human body has been unable to maintain the pace which has been set, and ill health or even mental breakdown has resulted.

Whilst in one sense we are called on to "lay down our lives" (1 Jno. 3:16) in the cause of the gospel, with our lives being characterised by self-sacrifice, it does not seem to be wise to allow ourselves ever to get to the stage where we become unproductive or incapable of fulfilling basic responsibilities. I cannot think that we are actually called upon to do that, and a disciple who is genuinely overwrought and at the point of collapse is of little use to anyone. What we are now thinking about is balance, a concept we talk about often, and which needs to be factored into the choices we make about how we use our time. The Lord himself had regard for this point, for in the passage mentioned above he invited the twelve, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while" (Mk. 6:31). Only for a while, admittedly; but evidently the Lord expected his followers to rest when that was necessary.

Of course, it is easy to justify relaxation when it is *not* really necessary, too. Sin is deceitful, and we can always convince ourselves that we 'need' or 'deserve' time on the things we prefer doing when there is still important work to be done for Christ. This is not what I am advocating, and we should be on our guard against entertaining such selfish thoughts in our minds, being ruthlessly honest with ourselves when we are faced with these choices. But activities designed to refresh our bodies and minds are still a profitable com-

ponent to life in Christ, not easily dismissed as of no value or self-indulgent. Most will agree with this.

Our choice of recreation

The nature of the recreation we choose to engage in, however, and how much time we devote to it, are other matters, certainly ones in which our consciences need to be involved. Each of us will gravitate towards activities we find enjoyable, stimulating and rewarding, and our individual tastes will vary widely; and undoubtedly we will also draw boundaries for ourselves in different places. As a general principle, however, none of us could deny that we should be seeking out activities which are genuinely wholesome and in keeping with Christian discipleship. We may not find that spending every available holiday on a preaching campaign provides us the overall balance we are looking for; but, at the other end of the spectrum, what does it say about us if we decide to devote several weeks of the year to mere pleasure-seeking in a way which makes it difficult for anyone to tell that we are followers of Christ?

Similarly, the prospect of improving our appreciation of creation by spending an afternoon gardening might fill us with horror; yet does that really entitle us instead to give over the same hours to a film in which ungodly behaviour is a key component? It is a curious feature of human nature that we can find ourselves 'entertained' by watching people do things we would never do (so we say) ourselves; and if such unfruitfulness is the best we can come up with, there is surely doubt about the genuineness of our faith.

It would be invidious to compile a definitive list of activities considered appropriate for occupying a disciple's leisure time, because life in Christ is not like that. It consists of applying a set of Scripturally determined principles against the backdrop of a clear conscience, rather than ticking off a schedule of dos and don'ts, as the Pharisees in the time of the Lord (for example) were guilty of doing. As we have already observed, it is always easy to justify doing things we really want to—like those Pharisees, sometimes performing mental gymnastics with the ingenuity of our reasoning.

But seeking to differentiate ourselves from them is not the real issue, which is what we actually have most appetite for in life. If our hearts truly desire to be occupied with things of spiritual value, then not only will we be less selfish with

such time as we have, but on the occasions when we do seek refreshment we will find ourselves much more readily engaged in activities that truly reflect the will of God for His children, rather than our own fleshly instincts. Surely that is the way we want to be found when the Lord returns.

Cultivating the right attitude to leisure

How, then, do we cultivate this appetite? How do we, in faith, change the way we think from what we are naturally, and come closer to the Divine mindset—the spirit of God—so that the works that follow better reflect the family likeness with the Creator that we wish to share? Faith—the living faith which James writes of (Jas. 2), and which is evidenced by works of righteousness—comes from hearing (“from what is heard”, RSV), which comes in turn from the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17).

It is only by grasping every opportunity to fill our minds with Divine thoughts and concepts that we can ever expect to influence fundamentally

our perception of who our ‘free’ time actually belongs to, and how we therefore choose to occupy it. Hours conscientiously spent with the Word of God, and in the company of those who can most encourage us (and whom we can best encourage) on the way to the Kingdom, are supremely powerful influences in this regard, and we neglect them to our own spiritual disadvantage.

In an age where we have more leisure time than ever before, with all the opportunities that this affords us, it would be ironic indeed were we to be found frittering away this time on the worthless distractions of a godless world when the Lord appears. Like all the faithful of old, often faced with similar choices about how they responded to the temptations of their day, surely we love God enough to believe that “He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Heb. 11:6) and therefore to seek to fill such hours as we have with works that genuinely honour Him and best prepare us for everlasting life.

Particular care may need to be taken to examine our objectives when choosing suitable pastimes. What may seem perfectly innocent and even instructive, say a love of nature—birds or flowers—may have dangers that we need to be aware of beforehand. For example, it may become an all-consuming interest so that it blots out more important things. We may find that, if it is undertaken with others, Sunday may be the best time to pursue it, or that Bible Class night may be the only convenient time for them to go. Even the most innocent interest, where the company of others is involved, will almost certainly have a social dimension to it that can suck in the unsuspecting. Here we have to recognise with the apostle that, while many of these things may be lawful, they are not all expedient or profitable.

A hobby which involves collecting things may seem innocent enough, and often educational, but it still needs to be kept in its place. Is it soaking up too much time, time that could be better spent visiting the sick or the widow? Does its pursuit take us away from the Word? Is it mopping up scarce resources, perhaps to the detriment of the family or of our brethren? And when we have collected as many of the item as it is possible to obtain, what are we going to do with them? Are they an investment, possessions in which we may be tempted to place our trust or for which we may find ourselves building bigger barns? What is their worth, judged against the things of real value, the eternal things?

The humanist world in which we live has taught us that we have a *right* to enjoy ourselves, that we owe it to ourselves to be selfish at least occasionally, that hard work (which of course we all undertake) deserves a certain amount of self-indulgence. But is it right to holiday where there is no ecclesia? Should we spend large sums of money on relaxation without regard for poor brethren overseas for whom a holiday is undreamed of? Whilst mission work and campaigning may not be suitable for everyone, have we thought about the needs of others, and are we justified in putting self first?

John S. Roberts, “‘Walk as children of light’ (Eph. 5:8)”, *Testimony*, May 2002, p. 175