

The Life of Leisure and the Christian Life

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 9:14-17 and Amos 6:1-7

On Friday Afternoons across North America, people restlessly plow through the last of their work, trying to keep their concentration, trying to keep their focus. They're still at work, but already their mind is drifting toward the weekend. They are anticipating their leisure. Workers stop by each other's cubicles and ask each other, "So what do you have planned this weekend?" They're not expecting an answer about work. They are not expecting an answer about meetings and projects and deadlines; they are asking each other about leisure. What fun things are you going to do? A ball game? A movie? The beach? A golf course? A hike? A little cottage time? They are enjoying the sweet anticipation of leisure.

We love our leisure. It is a huge part of our life. We love to talk about it with our friends. We love to think about it, dream about it, anticipate it. Our leisure takes up a huge chunk of our time and our money. Entertainment, tourism, sports—we spend a ton of money on our fun. According to some pre-pandemic data I read, something 3.4 trillion dollars a year was spent on tourism alone. Leisure is tremendously important to us and we are constantly inventing new ways to entertain ourselves.

But even though leisure is such a big part of our lives, it strikes me that we're not very good at thinking theologically about it. We spend time and money on it, but if I asked you, could you tell me God's will for your leisure? Could you tell me the principles that might guide you as you plan your weekend activities? Could you tell me anything about the role leisure should properly play in the life of a believer? My guess is that you couldn't. Frankly, there isn't much written on the subject. We need to have some theological clarity about our leisure! We have a Calvinist work ethic. We know about that. But no one ever talks about a Calvinist leisure ethic. Why is that!? Something is missing. We need some theological reflection on our play.

Maybe a place to start in our thinking is to recognize how often the promise of our leisure prove to be false. Even as the roller coasters get bigger and the restaurants get fancier, and the streaming service options multiply, it's not clear that we are more satisfied in our recreation. In fact, sometimes our leisure activities make us feel worse instead of better. I think you know what I mean by that. I often look forward to watching a Detroit Lions game. When they're on and I'm able to watch, it's the kind of leisure I anticipate. In the middle of a busy day of the office I look forward to those quiet hours on the couch. But most of the time, especially is I watch the game alone, I feel worse after watching the game, and not just because the Lions always lose. There are things I enjoy about watching TV sports, but there is something in the passivity of 3 hours watching a game that also makes me feel dull and sedated. Leisure can be bad for your spirit.

Amos knew this. Amos really knew this. Amos lived during one of the most prosperous times in Israel's history. People had disposable income and disposable time and they used it for leisure. Amos wasn't impressed. At the end of chapter 5 he let them have it for spending time and money on fancy worship, but failing to let justice roll like a river and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Now he lets fly with a series of woes that could easily be updated to fit our modern pursuits: Amos said: "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on couches." Which could be: "Alas for those who snooze the afternoon away on their sleep comfort bed, who channel surf from their designer sofas." Amos said: "Alas for those who dine on choice lambs

and fattened calf while drinking wine by the bowlful.” Which could be “Alas for those who flit from one fine restaurant to another and who spend enormous conversational energy on the subtleties of the wine” Amos said; “Alas for those who strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments.” Which could be: “Alas for those who spend endless hours lost in their headphones.” Amos said: “Alas who use the finest lotions.” Which could be; “Alas for those who are obsessed with Botox and day spas.”

Amos never pulls punches does he? The words of the prophet tell us that there is some leisure that God condemns. There is leisure which turns our eyes away from our neighbor’s need and toward our own appetites and pleasures. There is a leisure which sedates us and keeps us from seeking the kingdom of God.

But the Bible also makes it clear that not all leisure is bad. In our Matthew passage, some deadly serious disciples of John the Baptist see Jesus’ disciples having fun-eating and drinking, going to weddings, parties, having nice dinners at tax collector’s houses-and they accuse them of insufficient moral seriousness. “Slackers! We fast all the time! We’re all business; you goof off! We are committed to the work of the Lord. You like to enjoy yourselves!” Jesus tells them to lighten up. Life is not all mourning. Life isn’t a perpetual funeral. The bridegroom is here. There’s a party going on.

There is a time for mourning in this world. There are times when Jesus is not among us as bridegroom, he’s among us as suffering servant. Those are times when the work of the kingdom and the needs of the world are before us. We’re not celebrating in those times; we are picking up our cross. But when the bridegroom is here, and the resurrection promises are in the air, and the good things of creation are all around us, and the new wine is flowing, well for heaven’s sake put down your to-do list, stop checking your email, and dance!!

These are the two ways Jesus is among us, and Jesus tells parables about both kinds of presence. In Matthew 25, he tells the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. In that parable Jesus isn’t among us as the bridegroom; he’s among us as the naked, the hungry, the stranger. That’s when we are called to serve and sacrifice. But in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), Jesus is among us as the bridegroom. The Father invites the workaholic elder son into his house for a party. Come on in son! Your brother is home! Grace has won the day. Sing and dance with us, because salvation has come to our house!”

So, there is destructive leisure, and there is good leisure. How can we discern the difference? Let me close tonight with some very basic guidelines for us, guidelines which will teach us how to play God’s way. First, as Christians we must fight the idea that there is such a thing as spare time or free time or empty time. We must fight the idea that there is time which is a sort of neutral space where we can do whatever we want, whatever makes us happy, whatever relaxes us. There is a kind of view of leisure in our society which treats it as pure distraction, pure escape. It’s sort of the “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” attitude. This is nonsense. All time is God’s time, and all time is meaningful and Spiritual. How and what we play is very important to who we are and who we become.

We know that this is true for children. Many educators are bemoaning the loss of play for young children. Kid’s schedules are becoming increasingly structured. Preschools and kindergartens are becoming more and more academic. ‘Forget play time! Teach these kids Math! Get them reading! I want my child subtracting two digit numbers and playing Bach on the violin by the time they are 5!’ But more and more educators are recognizing that kids need play. They need play not just as a break; they need play to help them grow. They need unstructured time where they can explore and imagine, a place where they can be creative and discover what they

really like to do, play allows them to try different roles and explore different pathways as they discover who they are. This so called free time is not lost or wasted or empty. It is formative.

Play and leisure are also formative for adults, and I would argue that they are especially formative. In the working world and in school, most things are dictated to you. You have to do this, you have to do that, and it needs to be on my desk by Friday. But in our play we choose. You accept your job responsibilities and your assignments; you give yourself to your leisure choices, you submit your will to them, you enter into them in a different way than your responsibilities. And because you are willfully submitting to this activity, your play, your leisure has great power over your Spirit! One person spends the afternoon of her day off hanging out at the mall and spends her evening binging Netflix while she scrolls through social media. Another person spends the afternoon gardening and the evening hosting friends for a game of cards. These aren't just neutral choices by people with different tastes; these are formative choices by two people are shaping very different lives. Leisure is not empty space—it is the opposite. It is a spiritually formative time.

You see that in the Old Testament. God gives spiritual shape to the leisure time of his people. If you were an ancient Israelite, there was no such thing as a vacation week; your time off was the Sabbath and the religious festivals. The feast of tabernacles for example was basically a big campout. Everyone lived in booths for a week. It was your chance to have some time off and have a good time. But it wasn't empty; it was play with a purpose. You celebrated these feasts and you were brought more fully into the story of God's faithfulness to you. And the Sabbath was the same sort of thing. People rested on the Sabbath, but as Jesus made it clear, the Sabbath rest wasn't just empty space. The Sabbath was a day to do good. The Sabbath was a day to step back from your work and rest by choosing recreation and action which anticipated the eternal rest we will celebrate in the new creation. You really celebrate Sabbath well when your rest contains activities and play that are a foretaste of the celebrations of heaven. If your Sabbath contains new creation fellowship, new creation feasting, new creation worship, new creation healing, new creation fun, you're getting in the Spirit of things.

Now we're getting a sense of what Christian leisure might look like. Now we're starting to get closer to a leisure ethic. Here's my attempt to define what good Christian leisure might look like. Our leisure is at its best when it gives our heart joy, connects us to other people, does it win a way that connects us with the good things of God's creation and inclines us towards his praise. Our leisure is at its best when it connects us to our heart, to other people, to the goodness of the world and to the glory of God. When that happens, our leisure isn't just good, it anticipates life in the new creation. At its best our play gives us a whiff of what the new creation will be like and it begins to prepare us for the joy and fellowship of that place. When our recreation is going right, we both experience the goodness of this world and we anticipate the joy of the world to come.

How is that? How does play connect us to heaven?? One of the great things is that we won't do anything out of obligation any more. We won't do anything because we should or because we know that if we don't do it we'll be in trouble. In heaven we will freely choose to do good; we will give in to our desires, but it'll be okay because our desires will be perfect! There will be no more gap between what we want to do and what we should do. Won't it be great to get up in the morning and find that the thing that you really want to do and the thing you have to do will be exactly the same? The closest we ever get to that feeling in this world is in our play. When you are in the middle of one of those activities where you have freely chosen to do

something you love, something that involves your skills, and something that brings you closer to God's people and his creation, man you are close to heaven.

A person loves to cook. She invites her family for dinner and spends her whole afternoon pattering in her kitchen. At dinner she watches her family gathered together eating food and laughing as they exclaim about how good everything is and exulting in each other's company. When the meal is over she sits at the kitchen table drinking a glass of wine as the kids clean up. They share stories. They laugh some more. Do you know what that moment feels like to her? Heaven. It feels like heaven.

Or consider the holy joy of recreational church softball. You gather with good friends on a warm summer night, and you play a game which you are just thankful you are still able to play. Beside you in the outfield are your friends, and in the stands are your families-half watching, half not. Your kids are running around the Rec center grounds, laughing and safe. They're buying cheap candy at the snack bor. The shadows are long and the night is warm. The sound of encouraging voices cascade across the diamond. You know what that moment feels like? It feels like heaven. This is exactly what C.S. Lewis was talking about when he said, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."

There will be plenty of days when the bridegroom is gone and the suffering servant is with us; there will be plenty of days of no rest, only work and hard service. But let there also be days when the bridegroom is here and the new wine flows and on those days, may all our play and leisure be full of the joy that is heaven's serious business.

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