

To the Glory of God

On Christian Liberty, Lawful Recreation, and the Goodness of Creation

There is a particular kind of struggle that tends to surface early in the Christian life, and it is one of the better struggles a person can have. It goes something like this: you come to faith, or you come to a deeper awareness of God's holiness, and suddenly the things you used to do without a second thought now feel suspect. You sit down to play a video game or watch a movie or go fishing, and a voice in the back of your mind says, "Should I be reading my Bible right now? Should I be praying? Is this a waste of time? Is this sinful?"

That instinct, at its root, is a good one. It reflects a conscience that is being shaped by the Spirit, one that is learning to care about what God thinks of how you spend your life. The danger is not that you are asking the question. The danger is that you might answer it wrongly, and in doing so, bind your conscience where God has left it free. Because the Bible does not teach that every hour not spent in explicit devotion is wasted. It teaches something far richer: that all of life, including rest, play, and the enjoyment of creation, is meant to be received with thanksgiving and lived to the glory of God.

I. The Goodness of Creation

The starting point for thinking about any activity is the doctrine of creation. When God made the world, He evaluated His own work, and the verdict was unambiguous: "*And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good*" (Genesis 1:31). The

material world, the human body, food, color, music, laughter, the satisfaction of a problem solved, the pleasure of a sunset, the thrill of competition: all of these things were made by God and declared good by God. The fall corrupted the use of these things, but it did not erase their goodness. Sin is a parasite on creation; it has no substance of its own. It can only twist what God has made.

Paul addresses this directly in 1 Timothy 4:1–5, where he warns against those who “forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” The Apostle does not leave room for the idea that enjoying God’s gifts is inherently suspicious. He calls that idea a doctrine of demons. The person who eats a good meal and thanks God for it is doing something holy. The principle extends beyond food. It encompasses every legitimate enjoyment of the creation God has given us.

II. The Sabbath Principle and the Gift of Rest

God Himself rested. That is a staggering thing to say about a Being who does not experience fatigue. “*And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done*” (Genesis 2:2). God did not rest because He was tired. He rested because rest is good. He built a rhythm of work and rest into the fabric of creation before sin ever entered the picture. The Sabbath commandment does not merely permit rest; it commands it. “*Six days you shall labor,*

and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God” (Exodus 20:9–10). If God thought rest was a waste of time, He would not have commanded it.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, in its chapter on Christian liberty, speaks to the freedom believers have in matters not addressed by explicit command. The Confession states that God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. This means no one, including yourself, has the right to bind your conscience where Scripture has not spoken. If the Bible does not call an activity sinful, you do not have the authority to declare it sinful for yourself or anyone else.

III. All of Life Before God

The key text here is 1 Corinthians 10:31: *“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”* This verse is sometimes misread as a crushing standard: you must somehow be thinking explicitly spiritual thoughts during every activity, or you are failing. But that is not what Paul means. He is saying that every arena of life, not just the church service or the prayer closet, is a place where God can be glorified. The farmer glorifies God by farming well. The athlete glorifies God by competing honestly. The friend glorifies God by being present and kind. The person playing a board game with their family on a Saturday afternoon glorifies God by enjoying the gift of fellowship and laughter.

The Reformers understood this. They demolished the medieval distinction between “sacred” and “secular” vocations, the idea that monks and priests were doing holy work while everyone else was merely tolerated. Luther and Calvin both insisted that

the cobbler's bench is as much a place of worship as the pulpit, provided the cobbler does his work as unto the Lord. The Reformation doctrine of vocation means that your hobbies, your interests, your recreations, when they are not inherently sinful, are legitimate arenas for glorifying God.

The Puritan Richard Baxter, who was no friend of laziness, nevertheless recognized the necessity and goodness of recreation:

“Recreation is necessary to the preservation of health, and the refreshment of the body and mind, when they are tired or dull with ordinary labour. And he that denieth all recreation, doth injure the body and the mind, and unfit them for their proper service.”

— Richard Baxter, A Christian Directory

Baxter is saying something important: denying yourself all recreation does not make you more spiritual. It makes you less effective. It wears down the body and the mind that God gave you to serve Him with. There is a kind of hyper-scrupulosity that actually dishonors God by refusing the gifts He has given and by treating the body and the mind as things to be punished rather than stewarded.

IV. The Proper Tests

So how do you evaluate whether a particular hobby or activity is lawful? The question is not “Is this Bible study?” The question is whether the activity passes a few simple scriptural tests.

First, is the activity itself inherently sinful? Does it involve you in something that Scripture forbids? Pornography, drunkenness, dishonesty, violence done for its own sake: these are categorically off the table, not because recreation is wrong, but because the specific content violates God's moral law. But playing a guitar, hiking, lifting weights, cooking a meal, building something with your hands, reading a novel, watching a film, playing a game: none of these things are sinful in themselves.

Second, is the activity becoming an idol? *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"* (Matthew 6:21). A hobby becomes problematic when it begins to function as your source of identity, comfort, or ultimate joy. If you cannot go without it, if it crowds out your responsibilities to your family, your church, and your walk with the Lord, then it has moved from recreation to worship. The issue is not the activity; it is the heart's relationship to the activity.

Third, does the activity bear good fruit in your life? *"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things"* (Philippians 4:8). Paul is not listing categories of explicitly religious thought. He is describing a general orientation. The things that are true, honorable, lovely, and commendable include an enormous range of human experience. A well-crafted story is true in a deep sense even if it is fiction. A beautiful piece of music is lovely. A hard-fought competition is commendable. Paul's ethic is not narrow; it is expansive.

V. Grace and Freedom

The gospel is not a system of rules designed to make you feel guilty about every moment that is not explicitly productive. The gospel is the announcement that you are free. *“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery”* (Galatians 5:1). Part of standing firm in that freedom means refusing to let a falsely accusing conscience steal the joy that God intends for you to have. The Apostle Paul could say, in the middle of enormous suffering, *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice”* (Philippians 4:4). Joy is a command, not a suggestion. And joy does not only happen on your knees. It happens at the dinner table, on the trail, in the workshop, and anywhere else you receive the good gifts of God with a grateful heart.

The great Puritan preacher Thomas Brooks captures the spirit of this well:

“Remember that it is not hasty reading, but serious meditating upon holy and heavenly truths, that make them sweet and profitable to the soul. It is not the bee’s touching of the flower that gathers honey, but her abiding for a time upon the flower that draws out the sweet.”

— Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices*

Brooks is talking about meditation on Scripture, but his metaphor reveals a broader principle: depth matters more than volume. A life lived with depth and intentionality, a life that includes meaningful work, genuine rest, rich relationships, and honest enjoyment of creation, glorifies God more than a life lived in anxious, joyless, religious overdrive. God is not honored by your exhaustion. He is honored by your trust. And trust includes believing that when He called His creation good, He meant it, and that

when He gives you a Saturday afternoon with nothing urgent on the calendar, receiving it with gratitude is an act of faith.

So pursue your hobbies. Enjoy the things God has put in your path. Read a book that is not a theology book. Take a walk. Build something. Rest without guilt. *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change”* (James 1:17). Receive the gifts. Thank the Giver. And know that a life lived in gratitude, across all its dimensions, is a life that brings glory to God.