

BALANCING WORK AND LEISURE AS A CHRISTIAN

Introduction

Work and leisure are God's gifts to the human race. Our attitude towards them in our society is generally dominated by a secular and pragmatic outlook. The gradual decline of moral and spiritual values in our culture is also reflected in how people spend their leisure time. Within Christian churches, they are topics of neglect, and young people do not have a clear direction in these areas. The Bible provides a definite direction to the proper appreciation of work and leisure as originally intended by God. Today the confusion about work and play had degenerated into this: Someone once said, **"We worship our work, work at our play and play during worship."** Christians need to rethink, and rediscover God's blueprint for us in this vital aspect of our life.

Work can be defined as **"the meaningful employment of our time that results in productivity and fruit of our labour."** The Bible asserts the value of industrious work. Solomon said, *"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest"* (Ecclesiastes 9:10). The Protestant tradition made much of work as a creation ordinance. The **Reformers extolled diligence in work as a primary virtue in the Christian life.** It came commonly to be known as the Protestant Work Ethic in the later years. The Puritans in 17th century England emphasised on the same theme. William Perkins said, "man must live by the labour of his own hands and feed upon his own bread." Richard Bernard added, **"idleness is a great sin, the nurse of all vice."** Or, the common adage, "An idle mind is a devil's workshop." Work should be viewed as a calling in which the worker is a steward and he is accountable to God (cf. Ephesians 4:1). The goals of work are firstly, spiritual, to glorify God and, secondly, humanitarian, to serve men and society.

Today, the purpose and value of work is clouded by many material pursuits. The consumer ethic, coupled with the success ethic (in a meritocratic and elitist society), affected our career ethic. People value work as a means towards attaining success; with one of the signs of success as having a prestigious career or many promotions. The Singaporean dream consists of the five C's—Condominium, Car, Club, Card and Corporate success. More importantly to the Christians are the 3 C's—our **Creator**, our **Consecration to Him**, and **Contempt of the world**. To achieve success, workers thought that they must deny themselves of leisure, their families and their friends. They would have a competitive spirit that tramples upon other people on the way to economic success. Christians ought not to be so, for there is a higher purpose for us in the spiritual realm than just material gains and power on earth.

Concept of Leisure

The concept of leisure, on the other hand, is quite elusive and difficult to define compared to work. Some have simply defined leisure as the antithesis of work and called it non-working time. While this may be true in some sense, I find it insufficient and misleading. I believe leisure is **discretionary time**—time used fruitfully to the glory of God apart from the obligation of work, family, and society. It is an activity positively chosen for personal enrichment. It can be a time for physical, spiritual and intellectual and social refreshment, like reading a book or going for a walk or even interacting meaningfully with someone over a conversation. **Yet leisure is a matter of mental and spiritual attitude, not as a result only of external matters.** (A person on leave from work may not be enjoying leisure.) I think leisure provides the occasion for learning, growth and free expression, for rest and freedom, for rediscovering life in its entirety. It is a search for repose, for creativity and freedom. It serves many useful functions. Jesus had occasions of leisure with His disciples, as in Mark 6:31-32, we read, *"And he said unto them, Come ye yourselves*

apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. And they departed into a desert place by ship privately.”

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:12, “*All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.*” There are some things we do not do as Christian even in the name of leisure or relaxation. For example, dancing in a night spot, drinking alcohol, smoking, watching worldly movies or doing yoga which has religious connotation in its philosophy and origin. I treasure reading good Christian books, exercising in long walks with my wife, swimming, cycling, or listening to Christian music or messages, or playing the guitar or sharing and fellowshiping with others or just resting. It is more than non-work, it is positive benefit for our body and soul. I believe it is essential for a healthy ministry, a healthy mind and body as well. **If you don’t come apart and rest awhile, you may just plain come apart!** Take a book and go to the beach or quiet place to read. Seek the Lord in meaningful moments of life away from the hue and cry of work, family and community. Take a break (e.g., holiday) from work from time to time. We need it.

The Example of Jesus and the Disciples

In the Gospel, we see the record of Jesus and the disciples engaged not just in work but also in times of physical and spiritual refreshment (Mark 7:42; 8:10; Matthew 15:21, 29; Luke 16:22; John 10:40). Jesus took time off from the busy schedule of healing people, casting out demons and preaching and spent much time with the disciples privately. It was a time for personal refreshment as they retired from work and reinvigorated and re-energised themselves with the fellowship of the Lord and one another. Jesus often retreated to a mountain to pray (Mark 6:46). That is the source of spiritual strength and vitality for the continuance of the demanding Christian ministry. In the same vein, our bodies need the necessary rest and restoration. Leisure is an opportunity to repair our weary bodies and to recuperate from the stress and strain of the day. Leisure need not be non-activity. Work hard while it is time to work and have a meaningful and fulfilling time for recreation and leisure as well.

Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 3:13, “*And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God.*” You can be reading a Christian book or resting on the beach or even listening to good edifying music or light exercise. Taking care of some plants or fishes or birds may be quite refreshing. I find it helpful physically to swim, jog or play squash once a week. I like to read a book during my free time and to just rest on a Sunday afternoon. There is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). God has made us in a way that we do not work continuously to our physical detriment but **there is a day of rest in the week to recuperate, refresh, repair and reinvigorate ourselves in the Lord and physically too.** In some companies, it is common to see employees selling their annual leave to make more money and work on Sundays for overtime as well. This is not necessary a wise thing to do. Do not deprive yourselves of these wonderful privilege and pleasure.

Leisure and Stewardship of Time

What we do in our leisure time invariably supports some values and undermine others. Avoid a hedonistic philosophy in leisure. To expose ourselves to the spectacle of violence, horror and sex cannot possibly be good stewardship of time (especially from movies, computer games, Internet, portals and magazines). As faithful stewards of our leisure time, accountable to God, we have a moral obligation to reject leisure activities that are contrary to sound biblical Christian values. The triviality and shallowness of much worldly entertainment is an issue of stewardship of time for which we must be accountable one day (1 Corinthians 5:10).

We should use leisure productively and expediently to foster spiritual, physical and emotional well-being. Taking time for leisure is the starting point. Ecclesiastes 4:9 speaks of *“hav[ing] a good reward for their labour.”* Jesus said life does not consist in the abundance of things (Luke 12:15). We must strike a balance between work and leisure. Too much leisure is unhealthy and no leisure at all is not good also. There is to be a fine balance to our life. Our attitude towards it is determined by the principle of the stewardship of time. Most workaholics will take a utilitarian approach to it, which is unhelpful. **Moderation in leisure means avoiding the idolatry in leisure.** Leisure pursuit is capable of becoming a religion as well when people put other interests in the centre of their lives instead of God. For example, if everyday is play, then play will become tedious work one day. A good leisure life must meet spiritual and moral standards as well and contributes to one’s personal wellbeing in constructive ways by opening up possibilities not present in the routine of work and obligation. The Puritans gave us a perspective on what is generally not acceptable for leisure. The Puritans rejected games of chance like gambling, bear baiting (i.e., cruelty to animals), horse racing and bowling and carousing in and out of taverns. They were also wary of idleness, loafing and aimless inactivity. They honoured the Lord on the Sabbath in worship and rest and communion with the Lord and His people, and did spend more time with the family and the brethren in consecration and sharing and reading.

Moderation in All Things

In 1 Timothy 6:17, Paul tells us to *“Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.”* God has intended all things for our spiritual and physical enjoyment and we are to glorify Him in return in all things we do (1 Corinthians 10:31). A good leisure can foster one’s relationship with God and man. Moderation in leisure is important (Philippians 4:5). Extreme indulgence in leisure can lead to obsession and is one area that we must be mindful of. While I was preaching in Western Australia, I was told by a someone that the average Australian idol is spelled SPORT (especially cricket). **It is possible that a legitimate leisure can be turned into inordinate affection and does not augur well for a person’s spiritual health and vitality.** For example, I know that there are some who are enthralled by computer games, TV, watching videos, listening to music on the the ipod, s and watching violent and immoral movies. For the children it can be excessive playing with the Pokemon, Transformers or other little obsessions including pets, and other hobbies can be possible idols. I know of a brother before, who was so engrossed in his bodybuilding that he stopped coming for fellowship and worship one day, when competition approaches. Others are enamoured with listening to secular music or worldly entertainment (i.e. especially occultic or violet or immoral ones) or football or golf, and some are enamoured with their leisure that they neglected family, prayer, work and worship. Be careful that these things be not carried to the extreme. It can do more harm than good to us spiritually if it is too excessive.

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(NB. for deeper studies, read Ryken Leland, *Redeeming the Time - A Christian Perspective of Work and Leisure*, 1995)