

The Vanity of Sports and Other Needless Recreations

A Sermon by Richard Baxter

Another part of fleshly interest to be denied, is, vain sports and pastimes, and all unnecessary Recreations. For this also is one of the harlots that the flesh is defiled with.

Recreations are lawful and useful if thus qualified. 1. If the matter of them be not forbidden: For there's no sporting with sin. 2. If we have a holy Christian end in them, that is, to fit our bodies and minds for the service of God: and do not do it principally to please the flesh. If without dissembling our hearts can say, I would not meddle with this recreation, If I thought I could have my body and mind as well strengthened and fitted for Gods service without it. 3. If we use not recreations without need, as to the said End; nor continue them longer than they are useful to that End; and so do not cast away any of our precious time on them in vain. 4. If they be not uncivil, excessively costly, cruel, or accompanied with the like unlawful accidents. 5. If they contain not more probable incentives to vice than to virtue: as to Covetousness, Lust, Passion, Profaneness, &c. 6. If they are not like to be more hurtful to the souls of others that join with us, than profitable to us. 7. If they be not like to do more hurt by offending any that are weak or dislike them, than good to us that use them. 8. If they be used seasonably, in a time that they hinder not greater duties. 9. If we do it not in company unfit for us to join with. 10. Especially if we make a right choice of Recreations, and when divers are before us, we take the best; that which is least offensive, least expensive of time and cost, and which best furthereth the health of our bodies, with the smallest inconvenience.

These Rules being observed, Recreations are as lawful as sleep, or food, or Physic. But, alas, they are made another thing by the sensual, ungodly world. Sometime they must sport themselves with sin itself, in the abuse of God's Name, and Servants, and Creatures: Tippling and profane Courses are some men's chiefest recreations: And though the Law of the Land forbid most of their sports, and the Law of God commandeth them to obey all the Laws of men that are not against the Law of God, yet this is a matter of nothing to their consciences. And let the matter be never so lawful, they make all impious by a carnal end. It's none of

their intention to strengthen and fit themselves for the service of God, and an holy, righteous life, by their recreations: but it's merely because their fancy and flesh is pleased in them: Even as the Drunkard, Glutton, or Whoremonger, that have no higher end than Pleasure, and can give you no better account why they feed their lust, but because they Love it, and it's their delight: just so is it with sporty youths and gallants. How few of many thousands can you come to that are at Cards, Dice, or Dancing, that can truly say, they would not do any of this but for God, and to fit themselves for his service? Did you ever know such a one? I believe in some better kind of Recreations you may know some such; but scarce in these. Alas this sin is not of so small a stature as too many impenitent souls imagine. It's one of the crying sins of the Land, and I believe one that brought down the vengeance of the late war upon us: and yet it is not half cured after all. The Gentry of England that should have been educated in Learning and the fear of God, and been the examples of the people in temperance and holiness, have been lamentably brutish and drowned in this (with other parts of gross) sensuality. Instead of serious Prayer, and holy Conference, and instructing of their Families, Cards and Dice took up the time, and cursing and swearing were the common attendants of them: and their Children and Servants learned of them, and took the same course. They bestowed more time in these, and in hunting, hawking, bowling, cocking, Stage-plays, and such like, than they did in the serious worshipping of God; yea than they did in the works of any lawful calling: For indeed they lived as without a calling, doing very little else but rise, & dress them & complement those about them, and drink, and eat, and so to their sports at home or abroad, and then to eating and drinking again, and so to their vain discourses, and so to their beds again: and this was the ordinary course of their lives: They sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play, Exod. 32. 6. 1 Cor. 10. 7. In the sins of Sodom did they live, Pride, fullness of bread, and idleness, Ezek. 16. 49. They trod the steps of him that Christ had told them, did cry in vain for a drop of water to cool his tongue, Luke 16. 19. gallantly clothed, and fared deliciously every day (or sumptuously.) Their whole life almost was but a sacrifice to their flesh, to their belly, their fancies and their lusts: Till God broke in upon them in his wrath, and found them another employment and shortened their store, and diminished their full estates and brought them into contempt and trouble; and yet how common is the sin to this day? Isa. 5. 11, 12, 13. [Wo unto them that rise up early in the morning that they may follow strong drink that continue till night, till wine inflame them; and the Harp and the Viol, the Tabret

and Pipe, and Wine are in their feasts; but they regard not the work of the Lord, nor consider the operation of his hands: therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge, and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst: therefore Hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure, and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth shall descend into it,] Amos 6. 1, 4, 5, 6. Woe to them that are at ease in Zion,—that stretch themselves on their Couches, and eat the Lambs out of the flock, and the Calves out of the stall, that chant to the sound of the Viol, and invent to themselves instruments of music—that drink Wine in Bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.]

The precious time that this sort of men lay out in their needless sports and recreations, is more worth than all their estates; and if their sin had no other aggravation but this, I confess I should take it for a far greater sin than any that thieves are usually hanged for at the Gallows! what! for men that have received more from God than others, and are obliged more to him, and are capable of doing him more eminent service, for such as these to live like Epicures! and when they are hastening to an endless life, to waste the most yea almost all this precious time in Flesh-pleasing sensuality! I think it is one of the greatest sins in the world! And no wonder that Christ made such choice of such a one as these, to acquaint them who they are that shall be damned, Luke 16. And if Conversion make not a wonderful change on them, they must look undoubtedly to speed as he; and to have the same account of the cause of their misery [Son, remember that thou in thy life-time receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented] Luke 16. 25.

Abundance of them bestowed more upon Hawks and Dogs, than would have maintained many poor families: And play for large sums at Cards, and Dice, and Cocking, and Horse-races. Covetousness, & Luxury, and Passion, and Swearing, and Cursing, were the virtues that their sports did exercise: and others must be their companions in the same impieties that they perish not alone. Unmerciful and oppressing they are in their very sports, treading down the hedges and corn of poor men, in following their game, and never making them reparation for their loss, but raging at them if they do but complain. No fitter company for

them, than the most impious Swearers, and ribald filthy Speakers, and the like: who was offended at it, they cared not; but made it an additional part of their sport, to cast a scorn at those that durst not and would not be as bad as they. And all this is, when they have variety of civil, cheap, inoffensive recreations at hand, which might better have fitted a Christians end.

And the youthful part of the vulgar, are, in their degree, of the same spirit with those Epicures, and of the like practice, as far as their estates and leisure will allow them: Witness the eagerness of the rabble in following after Wakes, & May-games, Cock-fighting, Dancing, Dice, and Cards, and such like exercises. And more pleasure they have in these than in Prayer, or Gods Praises, or holy Instructions, or Conferences. As much as the most sordid Whoremonger or Drunkard is enslaved in his proper flesh-pleasing sin, so much are our voluptuous youth and others addicted to gaming, sports, and pastimes, and enslaved to this flesh-pleasing sin of theirs. Ah poor people! Doth time run on so fast, and are you hasting to the dreadful bar of God: and do you want pastime? Is your work so great, and your time so short and utterly uncertain; and yet must you hunt about for pastime? Must it go with you in heaven or hell for ever as you spend this hasty inch of time, and yet have you days or hours to spare for needless recreation? O what a cursed thing is sin, that can so bereave men of the use of reason, in that one thing for which their reason was given them! Yea we can scarce convince these poor deluded souls that they do amiss; but they say, [What harm is there in cards or dice, or hunting, or bowling, or such like recreations? How shall we live without recreation? Answ. But is there no harm in needless flesh-pleasing, and in the loss of precious time, to men that are ready to step into eternity? O that ever men should make such a question! Suppose your recreations were the lawfulest in the world, in their own nature? Can there be a greater villainy, than to set your hearts on them, and make a God of them, and cast away precious hours on them, in using them needlessly? Recreations are your physic, or your sauce; & therefore must not become your food, nor made a meal of. They are only as whetting to the mower, which must never be used but when there's need: To spend half the day in needless whetting, deserves no wages. O did you know but what your work, and time, and what's before you, you would be better husbands; and then you might so contrive your business, as to lose no time in recreation. For either your calling puts you on the labour of the mind, as Students, or of the body, as labouring men. If study be

your calling, you need no exercise of recreation but for your bodies, for variety of studies is the best or sufficient for the mind: And two hours walking is bodily recreation enough in a day, for almost any student that is in a capacity to labour: And if you be labouring men, or your calling lie in bodily motion, then you need no recreation for your bodies besides your Callings, but only for your mind: And if you love God and his Word, what better Recreation for your minds can you devise, than thinking of the Love of God in Christ, and meditating on the Law of God, Psal. 1. 2. and calling upon him, and rejoicing in his praises, and the Communion of his Saints? Is not a day in his Courts, better than a thousand anywhere else? The Spirit of God by David said so, Psal. 84. 10. But alas it is this unmortified flesh, and tyrannizing sensuality that blindeth you, that you cannot see the truth: or else all this would be as plain to you as the high way.