

Directions for Amusements and Recreations by Richard Baxter

If you wish to avoid the sin and danger of unbiblical amusements masquerading as acceptable recreations — you must understand what acceptable or lawful recreation is, and its legitimate purpose. No wonder Christians sin, if they do not know what is right!

Without doubt, some amusement and recreation is *lawful*, indeed, *necessary* to some people. Lawful recreation is the enjoyment of some natural thing, or participation in some activity which is not forbidden, for the stimulation of the natural spirits. It may be for the use of the mind, or the exercise of the body. It is some pleasurable activity or exercise, ultimately intended to fit the body and mind for their normal duty to God.

Amusement, sport and recreation are special terms. We do not call arduous labor by such terms, though it may be *better* for us and more *necessary*. Nor do we call every enjoyment by these terms, for eating and drinking may be pleasurable, and holy things and duties may be delightful, yet they are never termed sports or recreations. It is the *imaginative faculty* that is chiefly delighted by amusements.

TESTS FOR BIBLICAL LAWFULNESS. All of the following factors are necessary to render an amusement, sport or recreation lawful, and the lack of any one of them will prove it to be unlawful.

1. The genuine *purpose* or *intention* behind your indulging in it, must be to fit you for your service to God. It must help you to function better either in your work, or in His worship, or for some work of obedience in which you may please and glorify Him. ¹ Corinthians 10:31 says, "Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatever you do — do all to the glory of God."

A lawful recreation must be a means fitly chosen and used to this end. If it has no ability to improve us for God's service in our ordinary callings and duty — then it cannot be to us a lawful recreation (though it may be lawful to another person to whom it is a real help).

2. All recreations are unlawful, which are for their own sakes preferred before our callings.

3. All recreations are unlawful, which are used only to delight a carnal imagination, and have no higher end than to please the sickly mind that loves them.

4. All recreations are unlawful, which hinder and spoil our fittedness for the duties of our callings, and for the service of God; or, which, putting the benefit and hurt together, *hinder* us as much or more than they help us.

5. All recreations are unlawful, which take up any part of the *time* which we should spend in greater works.
6. All recreations that take up more time than is reasonable for a recreation, are equally unlawful.
7. If an activity is profane, such as making sport of holy things, it is a mocking of God. It is wickedness demanding God's heaviest punishment, and cannot be lawful.
8. All recreations which wrong other people are unlawful. (This includes the activities of stage players and comedians who ridicule others to their injury.)
9. It is also sinful to make fun of the sinful ways of others, or to act them ourselves, which is common with comedians and other profane wits.
10. Immoral, obscene stage plays and recreations are unlawful, in which filthiness is represented without due expression of its odiousness, or with obscene words or actions. To Christians, Ephesians 5:3-4 applies: "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place."
11. Those amusements are unlawful, which involve the multiplying of worthless words, engaging the participants in foolish, needless, unprofitable chattering.
12. Those amusements are sinful, which tend to excite lust in ourselves or others, swearing, cursing and railing, and fighting and squabbling.
13. Those amusements and recreations are sinful, which involve covetousness, to win money from others; or that tend to stir up covetousness in those you play with.
14. Cruel recreations also are unlawful: such as taking pleasure in watching duellers, fighters, or any that abuse each other; or any animals that are made to needlessly torment each other.
15. A recreation is unlawful if it is too costly, for we are God's stewards, and must be accountable to Him for all we have. It is sinful to spend needlessly on amusement.
16. Lastly, if you have the choice of various recreations before you, you must choose the fittest. If you choose one that is less fit and profitable, when a fitter might be chosen, it is sin; even though that which you chose would have been lawful, if you had no other.

By all this it is easy, for example, to judge the lawfulness of our common stage plays.

What is a fit recreation? It is either the body or the mind that needs recreation most. Either you are sedentary people, or those who work physically. If the former, then it is the body that has most need of exercise and recreation. In this case, to sit at sedentary amusements or recreations, instead of exercising your bodies, is to increase the need of exercising them. It does you much more harm than good.

If, however, you are hard laborers, and need rest for your bodies and recreation for your minds, or are sick, so that you cannot use bodily exercise — then surely a hundred profitable 'exercises' are at hand which are more suitable to your case. You have *books* to read (including the Word of God) which can increase your knowledge in history, geography, and arts and sciences.

Here are some *questions* to ask yourself from time to time about your recreations:

1. Do you think that either Christ or His apostles used stage plays or similar entertainments and amusements, or ever sanctioned or encouraged addiction to them?
2. Does not your conscience tell you when your delight is more in your amusements than it is in God? Such recreations (those we love more than the things of God) in no way increase our delight in God, but take it away.

Do you not feel what a plague certain pleasures are to your affections — how they bewitch, befool you, and take you out of love with holiness, and make you unfit for anything that is good?

3. Do you bestow as much time in praying and reading the Word of God and meditating on it, as you do in your sports and recreations? Do you not know the value of those precious hours which you play away?
4. Would you be found at stage plays or vain amusements when death comes? Would you not rather be found at some holy or profitable labor?
5. Will it be any comfort to you when you are dying, to think of the time which you spent in plays and vanities?
6. Dare you pray to God to bless your sports and amusements to the good of your soul or body? Would not your conscience tell you that this would mock God?
7. If you are sure that you sin not in your games or sports, either by excess or addiction or neglect of spiritual duties, are you sure that your companions do not? If you say, "We are not bound to keep all other men from sin," I answer: You are bound to do your best towards it; and you are bound not to contribute willingly to their sin. If Paul would never

eat meat while he lived rather than make a weak person offend, should not your sports be subject to as great charity?

If you know what sin is, and what it is to save or lose one's soul, you will not aid and abet other men's sin, nor so easily contribute to their plight. In such cases, "we then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak [that is, to help them, as we do children in their weakness], and not to please ourselves [to their hurt]. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification [that is, prefer the edifying of another's soul, before our own pleasure]. For even Christ pleased not himself." If Christ lost His *life* to save men from sin, will not you lose your *amusements* for it?

8. What kind of people are they that are most addicted to games and plays, and what kind of people are they that avoid them, and are against them? With whom are these activities most identified? Judge wisely!

Here are some helpful counsels about choosing a recreation:

1. When you understand the true nature and purpose of lawful recreation, try to determine just how much and what sort of recreation is needful to you in particular. In this you must have respect, (a) to your bodily strength; (b) to your mind; (c) to your type of work. And when you have determined what and how much is needful and appropriate to help you in your duty, allow it its proper time and place, as you do your meals, and see that you do not allow it to encroach upon your duty and service.
2. Try normally to join profit and pleasure together, that you lose no time. It is a sin to idle away any time which we can turn to better account.
3. Watch against inordinate, sensual delight, even in the most lawful activity. Excess of pleasure in any such 'small' or lesser activity of life is very corrupting to the mind. It puts it out of relish with spiritual things; and turns it from God, and Heaven, and duty. To this end keep a watch upon your thoughts and desires, that they run not after sports and pleasures. Else you will be like children that are thinking of their sport, and longing to be at it — when they should be at their books or business.
4. Avoid the company of revelers, lovers of pleasure, and similar time-wasters. Come not among them, lest you be ensnared. Usually, amusements rate as foolishness to serious men; and they say of this mirth, as Solomon, 'it is mad' (Ecclesiastes 2:2). It is great and serious subjects which make serious men.
5. Be zealous and apply yourself to your calling and spiritual service. *Laziness breeds a love of amusement.* When you must please your flesh with ease — then it must be further pleased with vanities.

6. The sickly and the melancholy (who are usually least inclined to sport) have much more need of recreation than others, and therefore may allow it more time than those in health and strength.

7. Be much more severe in regulating yourselves in your recreations, than in censuring others for using some sports which you dislike. For you know not perhaps their case, and reasons, and temptations. An idle, time-wasting, sensual pleasure-seeker — everyone should look on with pity as a miserable wretch.

If you are *sedentary*, walking or some honest, bodily exertion that joins pleasure and profit, is a fit kind of exercise for you. If you are a *laboring* person, and need only pleasure for your mind, you can take pleasure in Scripture, in holy conference, or in good books. We have flowers and trees and beasts and birds and other creatures to behold. We have fields or gardens or meadows or woods to walk in. We have our near relations to delight in; our wives or children, and our friends. We may talk with godly, and wise, and cheerful people, about things that are both pleasing and edifying to us.

God has given us a world of lawful pleasures. But stage-plays are, at best, very questionable, and most are to be condemned as unlawful. Should one who fears God and loves his salvation — choose so doubtful a recreation in preference to so many undoubtedly lawful ones? And you must know what a time-wasting sin *excessive leisure* is. Suppose the activity is *lawful* — is it lawful to give so many hours to it, as if you had neither souls, nor families, nor other responsibilities or service to perform?

For myself, when my *mind* needs recreation — I have a variety of relaxing and invigorating books, and friends, and business to do that. And when my *body* needs it — the hardest labor that I can bear is my best recreation. Walking serves instead of games and sports as profitable to the body, and more to my mind. If I am alone, I may improve the time in meditation. If I am with others, I may improve it in profitable, cheerful conference.

I do not condemn all sports or games in others, but I find none of them all to be best for myself; and when I observe how far the temper and life of Christ and his best servants were from such recreations — I avoid them with the more suspicion. And besides, I note that most people, by instinct, view ministers with distaste when they see them pursuing frivolous recreations.