

CHRISTIAN RECREATIONS AND UNCHRISTIAN AMUSEMENTS.

A Sermon by the Rev. Theodore L. Cuyler. Delivered Sunday Evening, October 24th, 1858, at the Cooper Institute, New-York.

THE passages of God's word which I bring to you this evening are as follows:

First, the eighteenth verse of the fifth chapter of Ecclesiastes.

“Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion.”

Also the third verse of the fourth chapter of first Peter; and also, finally, the thirteenth verse of the fourteenth chapter of Proverbs; which two passages flow naturally together:

“For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries;” for “the end of that mirth is heaviness.”

I want to discuss before you to-night, my fellow-travellers to eternity, the great subject of *Christian Recreation* and *Unchristian Amusement*. I wish to find out as far as I possibly can, what is healthful, and what is right; what is hurtful, and what is wrong; what every Christian may do, and what even a sinner ought not to do. It is a very delicate and a very difficult subject to treat; and I trust we may be guided wisely and safely through it. In order to throw light upon our theme—light from heaven, the best source of light—I have grouped before you to-night three appropriate passages of Scripture. In the first you will observe the principle that all men have a clear and undoubted right to every healthful and innocent enjoyment. God never created you or me to be wretched. Do you imagine it for a moment? He gave us possibilities of enjoyment, and ten thousand good things to enjoy. He gave me a taste for pleasant food, and pleasant food and fruit to taste. He gave me a desire for the luscious grape and sunny peach; and the grape hangs on the trellis, and the peach ripens for me in the sun-beam. He gave me a thirst for refreshing drinks; and healthful drinks he gives me with which to refresh myself; never, however, did he make this world a distillery for alcoholic poisons. He gave us a desire to be happy, and then put within our reach means, abundant means, for all pure and healthy happiness. While there is a time to weep—O my friends! these times to weep; how often they come and how long they last!—there is also a “time to laugh;” so God tells us in his book. There is a time to be cheerful, there is a time to be full of sun-shine, a time to be positively exuberant in the

out-flow of all animal spirits, in the liftings up of high mental delight, in the out-goings of pure and lofty spiritual enjoyment. This is right; this is commendable; and we shall probably see in the course of this discussion that it is necessary for our bodily, mental, and spiritual health to have just such enjoyments.

The second text brought before you is from Peter's letter to Christians of his day. He reminds them that they ought to follow Christ, which is the great idea of Christianity. He wished to remind them that they used to walk in revellings, banquetings, and excess—these things were the bitter fruits of their former ungodly tastes and appetites. They did not know any better. But now, he says, ye are the baptized ones of Jesus Christ. Now I warn you, that ye *do* know better, and you must put off the evil deeds, and live spiritually and righteously in this present evil world. You are no longer heathen but Christians, the pledged, banded and bonded followers of the holy Saviour, the professors of a pure faith, a "peculiar people," to keep your garments even unspotted from the world.

The third text is from royal Solomon. Poor old man! poor man! He ought to know (what he had found out to his sorrow) that revelling is the mother of all wretchedness, and that the end of mirth is heaviness. A heavy head, a heavy heart, a heavy load on the conscience, a heavy stupified moral sense, a heavy weight of remorse, a heavy account with God, an oppressive, crushing weight of final and everlasting retribution; these are mirth's bitter catastrophe.

Now these three texts unite in giving us a double truth for discussion. First, that Christian recreations are right,

proper, commendable, and beneficial; but that sinful pleasures are dangerous to the body and damning to the soul. Let us enlarge upon this proposition, beginning with the first truth that Christian recreations are right the world over. We have already seen that God's word does not forbid rightful enjoyments. This book is not a teacher of Popish penances, it was not written by monks, or to turn the world into a stupendous convent. The religion of the Bible is radiant with the light and the joys of heaven; there is a world of sun-shine in God's book. O troubled heart! the spirit that book inspires is never a gloomy one, nor morose. It is a libel on our holy faith to represent it as productive in itself of melancholy, or denying men any really innocent pleasures. It is not against innocent enjoyments but sinful ones, that God makes his protest. The libel is an old one. The skeptic who wants to caricature that book before a young man, and the frivolous trifler who would turn life into a long frolic and one unending carouse, repeats the stale scoff in the face of that young man, in order to seduce him into profligacy and ruin; but the Gospel is a system of life, deliverance, hope, joy in the Holy Ghost. It came to make guilty men happy by making them good, and by bringing them into peace with their God.

Now, in the very outset, I suppose that this assembly agree that we all need—that men and women, old and young—*need recreation*. Not only rest from toil—(and the people of this country are the most overworking people on earth)—but we need the occasional restorative of *recreation*. I use that word in its etymological sense: to re-create, to make a man over again as good as new.

You and I work ourselves down. Then we must be built up again. We need to unbend. We should not keep the bow always strung, else it loses its elasticity. Men were not created to be always drudges. They were to play once in a while as well as toil. All work makes a man a sorry slave. All play makes him a sorrier fool. The wise person avoids both extremes. God has not only given all powers of enjoyment, but recreation is an absolute need. I must have it, so must you. The best men have always found it so. Biographies of the most healthful Christians reveal them as unbending to an innocent sportiveness. Their grave faces relax sometimes into what the old Puritan used to call "the Christian liberty of laughing." Their over-active brains are regaled with a healthy holiday. When at work, they work like men and Christians. When at play, they unbend and sport like little children. That is nature; that is wise; that is beautiful. Martin Luther bends over that German translation of the book of God. Martin Luther elaborates his treatises against the great Romish delusion; and refreshes himself by hearing his beautiful wife, Catharina, sing sweet songs, and by decorating Christmas-trees for his children.

Granville Sharp never played more sweetly on human sympathies when he was arousing the world for the bondman, than when he used to retire from his philanthropies to play upon his flute in his terrace overhanging the Thames. Buxton is good at hunting abuses in Parliament. He is equally good in hunting with dog and gun over the English heath.

Wilberforce battles all day for God and humanity ;

labors for Bible circulation ; labors for genuine reform ; labors for Christian missions, and for India ; and then goes home to amuse his children with delightful stories, and trundles a hoop with them all around his garden at Clapham. He is as happy as a swallow. Blessed, blessed man ! he had a right to be happy, for he suffered like his Master for the suffering. Who had a better right than he, to let his soul flow out in its innocent joy ?

Now, then, we come to the practical point of this discourse : What kind of recreation do men need ? For whatever a man needs, according to his God-given nature, is right. Fix that first in your minds. Taking this as a clue in your hands, my young friends, you will be guided into the path of right and safety. The daily laborer who toils twelve out of the twenty-four hours, probably finds no recreation like simple rest. Lying down upon his bed is recreation. The Sabbath comes to him with rest ; social joys in his humble home are a part of his recreation ; an occasional hour in some free library, or listening to discoursings of truth and music, is healthful recreation. The great idea with him is *Rest ! Rest !* The student wants change of occupation — physical exercise. That attenuated form of his, which bends over the book until his face becomes as bloodless as the page he scans, should go out into God's free air, and all the better for him if the hand that is idle should swing the axe, or pull the oar upon the stream. I never shall forget a walk with that greatest of modern poets—the now departed Wordsworth — over the hills which he has made immortal ; and as I saw the hale and healthful

countenance of the great bard, I understood what his servant meant when he said: "My master's study is always out of doors."

One of the acutest minds in all England—Carlyle—once vented itself in this way to me: "My greatest pleasure is to mount my horse and ride out in the teeth of the wind away from these smoky streets of London."

Commercial men—and probably most of those who hear me, are commercial men—have many methods of recreation open to the most conscientious and godly-minded. And first of all, BOOKS! books which lift the soul up to the mountain top; books which take me to Pisgah's heights, and permit me to survey the realm of God's universe; books which enliven me and lead me to the recesses of the heart; books which bring me nearer to God in all his works; books which I can make fireside companions; each one of them, as it were a vial, containing the extract and essence of a great heart. Books make the first and purest of our recreations. But, methinks, some one starts up in this house and says: "May I read books of fiction?" Yes, sir, on two conditions only: first, that you never read any but those which are pure and soul-elevating; and next that you only read those as the occasional recreation of a mind fatigued by severer duties. It is as if you ask me, while sitting at a table: "May I eat that light syllabub?" "Yes, when you have dined on strong meat." But woe to him who feeds his body on syllabub alone! Woe to the young men or maidens, who have no good books in their heads or hearts! I believe there is more demoraliza-

tion of the young, more loss of character and incipient infamy, resulting from the vile pages of certain pestilential literature, which swarms in this country, than from any other source which Satan employs to ruin our youth. But a good book—a good book is one of God's best gifts to us.

Next to books comes **MUSIC**; music from the cradle-hymn which the sweet-voiced mother sings in our infancy, to the plaintive dirge that floats over the green-sward, where we are laid to our rest; music when it comes in the swelling oratorio, swelling and rolling in surges on the soul like the sound of many waters on the beach; or the martial air stirring the soul like the sound of a trumpet on the tented field; or the delicious evening hymns sung by our loved ones at the altar of our homes; or the anthems sung by the great congregations, rolling up to mingle with the oratorios of heaven, the ceaseless song of the ransomed and redeemed! I care not that Satan has stolen music and perverted it to sensual and infernal uses. That is no more reason why I should not make my heart praise my Maker, than that the vile abuse of any thing is an argument against its uses, unless as in the case of alcohol, where the use be an abuse of the user. The great dangers connected with the opera do not lie in the music, but in the usual accessories of the play-house; a subject of which we shall speak hereafter. Galleries of art, scientific lectures, are all means of recreation within the reach of the young; and I do thank those public benefactors, who are bringing to our shores so many master-pieces of genius; and were I possessed of a princely fortune (like him who was the princely

constructor of this edifice,) one of the best gifts I would give to the young men of New-York would be some Polytechnic Hall, in which, turning their feet from every wicked place, they might come in and enlighten their reason and purify their hearts in the long evenings of this season of the year.

Without dwelling farther on specific recreations, we come to this principle: that whatever makes your body healthier, your mind happier, and your immortal soul purer, is Christian recreation. If you never depart from these good sayings, you will never bring down the maledictions of him, who pronounced such fearful curses upon the reveller and those who are given to banquetings and excess.

In treating of recreations, I have gone upon the principle that they are sought for useful and lawful purposes. "Whatsoever ye do, do all for the glory of God." Every Christian ought to take his religion into his pleasures just as much as into his counting-room or his church. No Christian ought ever to spend an evening in any place, from which he could not return with the most devout and graceful approach to his Saviour, as he bends on his knee in his closet to spend the last hour of the day, as it flies up to God with its account.

II. Secondly; there is something very different from a desire for healthful recreation in the minds of most people, when they seek amusement. In this part of my discourse, I wish to treat of this different thing. It is not recreation; it is not for the sake of being better fitted for life's cares and toils and heroic duties; but it is pleasure for its own sake and ultimate end;

and the gay, frivolous, and pleasure-loving are generally in pursuit of that. They do not want refreshment; they want stimulant and high excitement. A wise man, for instance, drinks for refreshment. Of course he drinks pure water, or something that will not stimulate. On the other hand, the sensualist drinks for stimulation. He goes to the bottle which maddens and intoxicates. The love of excitement is what fills our dram-shops. The great mass of men go to vicious places for what? for recreation? Not at all: but for excitement; and the more fiery, the more stimulating, the better. Here is the supreme attraction of the theatre, the gaming-house, the drinking-saloon, the billiard-room. Within those brilliantly lighted apartments, the chief attractions are the high excitements to the nerves of the youth as well as the worn-out debauchee. The only reasons why young men seek such places, are the very reasons why they should not seek them. Instead of rest to the body and delightful entertainment to the mind, they are positively pernicious and poisonous. Such writers as those in this city who, during the last few months or the last year, have advocated dramatic entertainments, mistake the main position, when they confound recreation with sinful pleasures. One is right and the other is ruinous.

Every thing that rests my body or mind, improves my health and elevates my soul, is commendable. Every thing that stimulates this nervous system of mine, until I become a walking maniac; every thing that debauches my body, weakens my conscience, excites impure thoughts, and makes my soul a terrible house of imagery; every thing that makes me forget God

and eternity; is dangerous, and in the last damnable. To this test we must bring the theatre, the midnight carouse, and the ball-room. Do they recreate? Does the drinking-house recreate? Do they improve or profit, or do they demoralize and destroy for time and eternity? That is the question. I do not suppose any ideal or imaginary theatre, any ideal tipping-house. I am not discussing an imaginary state of the drama, where the audience are all saints, the actors are all apostles; where the curtain would rise to the sound of prayer instead of an overture, and the performance would close with the Doxology instead of a song sung by a harlequin; where no possible farce on the stage could be so ridiculous a farce as the audience. Such a state of things is imaginary. Introduce such a thing into New-York, and it would be deserted in four and twenty hours. Introduce a theater in which such plays as Hannah More's sacred dramas were to be performed by conscientious performers, and the whole class of theatre-goers would desert it in a week. As the preacher entered at one door, the profligate would go out of the other. As the deacon entered, the dram-drinker would retire. As the matron came with her pure daughters, the painted harlot would take flight to some more congenial atmosphere. All that class who are attracted and stimulated by such dramas as *Camille*, by the indelicate innuendo, by the ballet-dancers, by the wine-saloon, and the stimulants of the scene, never, depend upon it, would waste a dollar upon a puritanic theatre. It would be tasteless, insipid; it would be deserted in a body; and who would fill their places? Would you? Would I? Would my

congregation like to know that I filled one of the vacant places in that theatre? For myself, I can say that I have succeeded in obtaining all the recreation I have felt necessary, and an exuberant flow of spirits, without ever having entered the theatre, witnessed an opera, played a game of cards, attended a ball, or indulged in the excitement of the wine-cup; and no young man here wants one of them. Millions to-night are empty in purse, character, and godliness, and empty of hope, from having tried each or all of them. Why, do you not know that the real attraction of such places is the *stimulant*? All that is soul-exciting in tragedy, mirth-exciting in comedy, is brought into requisition. In one thrilling scene, a mother shrieks out her agony for her lost boy; in another, a betrayed mistress wreaks revenge on her paramour; and in another, a ribald scoffer burlesques the most sacred passages of the blessed book of God. It feeds the passion; the eye is not forgotten by the scene-painter, nor by the actor in the dress that captivates and inflames the lust. Those that can not be drawn by the stage are drawn by the exciting accessories, by the music, the wine-saloon, the presence of tempters to midnight debauchery. "WISE TO DO EVIL," would I write over the entrance of every theatre that ever stood in this metropolis. "He that is wise, let him not go in thereat." "By their fruits ye shall know them," is the test the world applies to me and to you, my beloved fellow-professor of Christ's gospel. It is a good test. I wish Christians would not forget it. "By their fruits ye shall know them;" and I in turn say to the lover of pleasure, Will you let me apply that to

your own pleasure? By your fruits I would know you.

And now I come to the theatre, (saying nothing about cards, the wine-cup, or the ball-room,) and ask: Does it improve the morals of those who deliberately attend it? Would a sensible merchant take a young man into his counting-room, make him his book-keeper, confidant, or cashier, on the strength of the knowledge that that young man regularly attended the play-house? The play-house has led more to the workhouse and to ruin, than probably any other source of temptation to the young, ever known in the history of our metropolis.

Secondly: if the theatre is a good school of morals, why do not the teachers learn and practise their own lessons? It is a poor gospel that does not convert its own advocates. Now, far be it from me to impugn the character of all performers; but in the best days of the dramas, Dr. Johnson used to say, he avoided their company, because of their tempting him to licentiousness. Ought a lady to attend any place where she will see her own sex unsexed; where woman appears in the attire of a man? That simple fact, a part and parcel of theatricals, is one of its most bitter and burning condemnations.

Again, if the drama is conducive to piety and morality, if it is productive of purity, why does it attract the dram-shop, the drunkard, and the profligate? While I do not say that no man of good morals has ever attended it, I *do* say that the bad people of this city have a most striking passion for theatre-going; and where the bad all love to go, the Christian ought

never to go. Would any young lady in this house like to hear that her pastor had been in the play-house? If she saw me preaching Christ after seeing me there, would she not probably have a far more vivid recollection of the play-house than appreciation of the truth I tried to teach? But God's test is the best: "The end of such mirth is heaviness." When Dr. Harvey heard a lady speak of the pleasures of the theatre in reply to the question as to what they were: "First," she said, "the pleasure of anticipation before I go; secondly, the pleasure of participation while I am there; and thirdly, the pleasure of recollection in recalling the play after I am gone." "Madam," said that most perfect Christian gentleman, "madam, you forget one pleasure." "What is it, sir?" "It is the pleasure of retrospection, when on the dying-bed you look back on a life immersed in such frivolities as that." That was her last "pleasure of recollection" of a night in a theatre.

Do you say that many dramatic productions are master-pieces of intellect? I do not deny it. I do not deny that Shakspeare's plays are the superbest of all plays, and yet across that resplendent sun of his imperial intellect, how many a dark spot of obscenity and profanation, almost blasphemy. So much so, that when a master of the art of reading—a female—undertook to read those plays before a promiscuous audience, she was obliged to leap from point to point, from passage to passage, as one crossing a stream would leap from stone to stone, in order to keep a dry foot. My friends, it is not necessary to enter a theatre to receive intellectual pleasure, from Shakspeare or any other

dramatist. You can have it by the fireside without the contaminating vices of the play-house. But if the grandest dramatic pieces that ever leaped full-grown from the brains of the great master of English poetry and philosophy, are only to be learned by my son and daughter at the expense of their virtue, I would lay them in their graves, ignorant of the first line that Shakspeare ever penned. There are higher walks of knowledge still—walks that I can tread in company with the angels—walks that I can take with my Divine Master—walks from mountain-top to mountain-top, out into the great landscape in which I study God, and see my Father in all his works.

Now look upon this question in whatever light you choose, these places of stimulation, not recreation, can not bear scrutiny any more than any of the sinful excitements I have barely alluded to. I have dwelt upon the theatre as a representative amusement, knowing that much we have said in regard to it would apply to kindred places of pernicious excitement.

My last argument against it is, oh! how many a heart that has been touched by the Holy Ghost during the last Pentecostal year; how many a young man who has melted in the prayer-meeting, thrilled under the sermon, been aroused by the Spirit to the grandeur of a Christian life and the claims of God and the glory of heaven; how many such a young man dates his first relapse, and first steps of apostasy, to one or more of the ten thousand scenes of fashionable dissipation, which surround him in New-York! That glorious man, Baptist Noel, of London, allied by birth to the nobility of earth—by the new birth to the nobility of

heaven—says that a youth came to London and gave himself up to teaching and Sabbath-ministration. By and by he missed him from the church—(that is the first step, my young friends)—then he heard that he was the inmate of a play-house; from the play-house he traced him to the dram-shop; from the dram-shop to the skeptic's club; and then down he went rapidly with the necessary gravitation of sin to the very depths of sin and debauchery. That young man, whose mother would not have recognized him had he been brought to the threshold, in the morning of his manhood, lay stranded upon life's shore, wrecked in body and wrecked in character. Mr. Noel was summoned to his dying-bed, and as he entered the room he saw that the young man was within a step of eternity. He took him by the hand—(oh! that pastors of the present day would take young men by the hand! you, my young friends, want men's hands, but God's hand most of all)—he took him by the hand and talked with him of Christ and hope in the dying hour. The young man lay under it all in perfect and terrific despair, as if he had quenched the Spirit forever: the last light seemed to have gone out. Noel bade him farewell and left him in indescribable agony of soul; but as he lifted the latch, the young man started up with a convulsive movement and begged him to return. The pastor went back to his bed. The young man mustering all his strength, drew his face down and whispered in his ear, "*I am damned! I am damned!*" and then fell back upon his pillow, and in a few moments was with his God! If the play-house and the skeptic-club bring such retributions as that, what Christ-

ian father or mother will ever consent that their loved ones should tread such fearfully slippery places? I will now present three or four simple tests, and I shall have completed this discussion :

I. First, every recreation which makes me stronger in body, happier in mind, and purer in heart, is beneficial.

II. Second, every amusement which is not an excitement, but the means of healthful recreation and improvement, is allowable for a Christian. I stand upon my Christian right in reference to them all: a healthy conscience enlightened of God, is to be the best judge.

III. Third, no Christian should ever take part in any entertainments from which he can not conscientiously turn to his Bible and his closet.

IV. Fourth, no Christian should frequent any place which Jesus Christ would forbid if he were personally on earth ; nor should he be seen in places so questionable that irreligious persons would be startled in finding him there. "Abstain," my friends, "from all appearance of evil."

Finally, let me remind you of the best rule of all—God's rule. Here it is, "Whether ye eat or drink, or whatever ye do," in work or pleasure, "do all to the glory of God." Then, when all your activities are in full play for God, and your whole brain at work in blessed schemes for studying and honoring him, your whole hands occupied in leading men in paths of purity and truth, your whole self happy in your work, your principles, your recreations—*that is life*, oh! **THAT IS LIFE!** You and I have heard sometimes a military

band approaching from the distance. We first catch the notes of the horn, then the rich swell of the bugle; then, as the band comes nearer, the finer, gentler, and more delicate instruments mingle in with their harmony, until at length they come upon us with full burst, in the splendid airs of Meyerbeer or Bellini! The ear feeds on the exquisite accordance as the bee feeds on the honey of Hymettus. So a man who says, "Whatever I do, I will do for the glory of God," finds in one act a beautiful melody; in the next act a sweet harmony; in the next a delicious joy; and so he goes on in full play and full work, nobly blending power with power, affection with affection, and all with God; and making life a joyous procession to the sound of horn, timbrel, and trumpet, he sweeps in at last through the heavenly gates to the raptures of Paradise. O blessed Saviour! let thy service be my unending recreation—thy presence my everlasting delight!