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AMUSEMENTS.

Sermon Delivered by Rev. Wm. Hamilton in Presbyterian Church, Sabbath 5th March.

"Use this world as not abusing it."—1 Cor. vii, 31. Amusements! Such is the theme to which your attention is at this time invited; and we could almost wish, in the absence of any direct reference to the subject in the word of God, that the story in this connection, handed down by tradition from apostolic times, had found a place in the sacred records. A youth returning from a hunting expedition, and carrying an unstrung bow in his hand, called for the apostle John in Ephesus, and was not a little astonished to find him amusing himself with a tame dove. His surprise at finding one so venerable in years and devout in character thus engaged found expression either in words or looks, whereupon the apostle asked him why his bow was unstrung. This, the youth assured him, was the only way in which the bow would retain its elasticity. "Just so," replied the aged man, "mind and body will not long retain their elasticity unless they are at times unstrung; prolonged tension destroys their usefulness." The New Testament contains no direct reference to the subject; and the only examples of relaxation or amusement there recorded, if indeed they are entitled to the name, are those feasts and dinners which Christ in company with His disciples occasionally honored with His presence. But though the Scriptures make no pointed allusion to the question it would be wrong to assume that they are altogether silent on the point. They lay down some general principles by which in this matter we are to be guided. Solomon who tasted nearly every cup of pleasure declares that "to every thing there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heaven." Paul who was consumed by a desire to fulfill his mission wrote to the weakly Timothy that "bodily exercise profiteth little," or as the words are rendered in the R. V. "bodily exercise is profitable for a little;" while he urged the Christians resident in licentious Corinth that "they use this world as not abusing it."

The words which we have selected as the basis of our discourse point out the necessary and proper use of the world, but utter a caution against its abuse. And what is said regarding the world in general may be viewed as equally applicable to its amusements.

1. These, we remark in the first place, are, in a certain way and to a certain extent, necessary. Amusements necessary! Can this be so? methinks I hear some one ready to ask. It is even so, though by amusements we do not mean that round of gauds and follies which some associate with the word, but only that exercise of body and relaxation of mind necessary to good bodily health and a sound vigorous understanding. I assume, of course, that all to whom I now address myself are engaged in some kind of work, toiling to earn a livelihood by the sweat of their brow or by some kind of mental effort. Some useful employment is necessary to the enjoyment of recreation, for how can that man find happiness and pleasure whose whole business it is to engage in their pursuit? No! Pleasure is a stranger to him who has no employment to call forth his mental powers or physical energies. But oh! what happiness is reserved for him who, having honestly striven, according to the ability which God has given, to perform his daily task, returns to his home in the evening cheered by the thought of relaxation from labor, mental stimulus from reading, or social intercourse with his family or friends. And can you, in the whole course of your reading, recall anything truer to life than the picture which is drawn in "The Cotter's Saturday Night?"

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"The toil-worn cotter frae his labor goes, This night his weekly moil is at an end, Collects his spades, his mattocks, and his hoes,

Hoping the morn in ease and rest to spend, And weary, o'er the moor, his course does homeward bend.

At length his lonely cot appears in view, Beneath the shelter of an aged tree; The expectant wee things, toddlin, stacher thro'

To meet their dad, wi' flichterin' noise and glee. His wee bit ingle, blinkin' bonnyly His clean hearth-stane, his thrifty wife's smile,

The lispin infant prattlin on his knee, Does a' his weary carking cares beguile, And makes him quite forget his labor an' his toil."

Such is a picture of the rustic laborer's enjoyment, and a beautiful picture it is.

But is no recreation necessary on the part of those whose work is mental? The need of this is clearly seen in the case of the apostle John, who did not think it beneath his dignity or age to relax his mental efforts, and so employ his time as to excite the astonishment of his youthful friend. Such relaxation in the case of those whose work is mental is usually taken in the open air, and varies in the case of different individuals. It would indeed form an interesting article were an author of ability to describe in one of our leading magazines the manner in which literary men rest the mind and invigorate the body. Sir Walter Scott after a few hours severe application to work in his study sought relaxation by attending to pastoral pursuits; while Dr. Thomas McCrie, his critic, and in some respects his most dreaded opponent, though a man of austere character and inflexible will, like the Covenanters whose memory he fondly cherished and whom he defended from obliquity and contempt—this man, amid his toils as a City pastor and Church historian, took long walks for exercise during summer, and in winter did not disdain to take a friendly game at draughts or to watch with the intensest eagerness the issue of a contest at curling played on one of the lochs near Edinburgh. Relaxation in some form or another is absolutely necessary; and those who have attained eminence in literature are generally those who by exercise have retained a sound mind in a sound body.

2. But, we remark in the second place, that the amusements which re-invigorate the mind and promote the development of the physical system must be legitimate in their nature. This implies that there are amusements which are illegitimate. And who that casts his eyes abroad is prepared to call this in question? It is alas! too apparent, and we should, as Christians, do what we can to discourage ungodly amusements. If true to our profession we must condemn excess in eating, and everything that would tend to intoxication. We must put the brand of infamy upon all illicit sensual indulgences; we must discountenance all games of chance, which involve, consciously or unconsciously, an appeal to Jehovah; we must frown upon all sports which are attended with cruelty to men or animals; and we must shun all circles of society which tend to debase human nature, degrade the mind, or incite passions which are merely animal or selfish.

But there are amusements regarding the lawfulness of which much diversity of opinion exists even among Christians. This, whether we admit it or not, is a question of very grave difficulty. Admitting that we are all actuated by love to God and regard Him as the supreme object of our affection, we are so differently constituted and our minds have become so warped by early training and the diversity of circumstances in which our lot has been cast, that things which seem right to one man are not infrequently denounced by

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another. Hence we often find a serious diversity of opinion among Christians as to their classification of lawful and unlawful pleasures. Certain things are condemned by some in which others, no less conscientious, feel at liberty to participate. These differences of opinion extend to the studies we may pursue, the sports in which youths may engage, the public entertainments we may attend, and the various forms of social intercourse we may enjoy as affording a pleasing relaxation to our usual employment. It would be impossible within the limits of a single sermon to enumerate the various amusements in regard to the lawfulness of which Christians are divided in sentiment. We shall therefore confine our attention to one or two of these. And perhaps there is none which more deeply affects this community at present than that of dancing. Is it lawful? or should it be condemned? To determine this it is necessary to have a clear understanding as to what is meant by dancing. If by it we mean the mere act of the members of a family and their intimate friends, all persons of reputable character and becomingly attired, crossing and recrossing the floor to the sound of music, I fail to see the grave moral impropriety which some have ascribed to it. But though innocent in itself the exercise may, on account of the strong prejudice entertained against it by some, and the influence for evil it might exercise on the minds of others, be discarded as belonging to those things which are not convenient. But do not misunderstand me. Though personally I know nothing of the pleasure which many find in this amusement, and do not feel at liberty to indulge in or in any way encourage it, I may express my surprise that some who denounce it in the most violent language countenance other amusements which have features far more objectionable. But when we pass from dancing, indulged in privately as an exercise, to the dissipation of the ball-room the case is entirely different. How often do persons, entire strangers, associate together in the dancing saloon! How often do ladies appear in attire that reflects upon their modesty! And how often are the passions of their gay admirers inflamed with wine! What physical ruin and moral disaster are frequently occasioned by this form of social dissipation! And how many alas! are there who after pursuing a round of such pleasures find themselves nervous imbeciles, unfit for the duties, and incapable of appreciating the enjoyments, of life. Christian sentiment too is divided as to the propriety of witnessing dramatic entertainments. There is, as is generally admitted, a dramatic element in human nature, but is this element, which may be legitimately employed in the service of God, developed in the right direction by the plays which are usually put upon the stage? Is it not an undeniable fact that by far the greater number of those pieces put upon the boards of the theatre minister to the depraved appetites of man's nature? There are, we are assured, plays free from moral taint, but how are they received? Let the array of empty boxes and stalls and all lack of enthusiasm furnish an answer. But how different is the reception accorded to those plays in which licentiousness, but thinly veiled, is personified! Thousands and tens of thousands are attracted by them, while the influence for evil they exert on those who witness them is too apparent. And what of their effect on those who sustain their part upon the stage? Though there are notable exceptions, too many of them are of tainted character, and imitate too faithfully in

become as hurtful as the liquor saloon or the gambling table. The society of our fellow men is fitted to interest our minds and is necessary for the development of certain features of our character; but if it lessens our estimate of human worth, curtails our time for doing good to others, or indisposes us for the performance of religious duties—if it tends to any one of these things it may become a snare.

Amusement has been compared to a medicine which taken in small doses proves a most excellent tonic, but taken in large doses is a most dangerous poison, and like medicine too it may be given to one man with the best results, and to another man in the same proportion with ruinous effects. The question then presents itself, Is this amusement right for me, and right for me in my present circumstances? Will it conduce to my bodily health, increase my mental vigor, and promote my usefulness in the world? For after all amusement is but a tonic designed to brace up our nature and fit us better for the enjoyments of life. This is pointed out by Bishop Hall in a beautiful passage which I cannot refrain from quoting: "Recreation," says he, "is intended to the mind, as whetting is to the scythe, to sharpen the edge of it, which otherwise would grow dull and blunt. He therefore that spends the whole time in recreation is ever whetting never mowing; his grass may grow and his steed may starve; as contrarily he that always toils and never recreates, is ever mowing, never whetting; laboring much to little purpose. As good no scythe as no edge. Then only doth the work go forward when the scythe is so seasonably and moderately whetted that it may cut, and so cut that it may have the help of sharpening."

If not strictly speaking evangelical in its tone, this discourse will, at least, be evangelical in its tendency should it lead you to examine your conduct and scrutinize it in the light of God's Word. Can you conscientiously declare, relying upon promised grace, that you are seeking to eschew every amusement that is sinful in itself or whose tendency is to drag you from the path of duty? Are your amusements made subservient to your usefulness? Do they merely serve as a tonic and fit you for discharging more efficiently the duties of life? Instead of judging your mind and exhausting your physical strength, do they dispose you with greater zest to engage in religious duties, remove the noxious vapors that occasionally cloud your intellect, and lead you with greater earnestness of purpose to labor for God? This is the test you must apply to the amusements in which you indulge, for unless they invigorate your body, refresh your mind, and dispose you with greater earnestness to engage in your work they are not serving the purpose for which they were intended.

And let me, ere I close, ask the young if it is not possible for them to combine recreation with service. Can you not find pleasure in cultivating your voice, and in assisting the choir to render in a still more efficient manner the thrilling songs of the sanctuary? Can you not, young and old alike, find relaxation and delight in ministering to the happiness of others? If you from proper motives interest yourself in the erring and lead them to God and eternal happiness; if you visit the sad, disconsolate, and bereaved, lessen their burden and increase their comfort; and if you alleviate the sufferings of the distressed and bring gleams of sunshine into their lives you will not lack enjoyment—an enjoyment which shall sanctify and ennoble your nature here and prepare you for still more glorious service hereafter—Amen.