

## Delighting in Creation

### Introduction

Have you ever listened to children at play? Parents, maybe you've eavesdropped on your kids, or maybe you've babysat or served in Kid's Life and just watched and listened. Kids at play are ridiculous, creative, heedless, totally immersed in their imaginary worlds, unhindered by worries of what people will think of them. The best part is how they provide their own sound effects. I love the beginning of the movie Toy Story 3, watching a young Andy play:

**Mr. Potato Head:** You can't touch me, Sheriff. I brought my attack dog with a built-in force field!

**Woody:** Well, I brought my dinosaur who eats force field dogs!

That's the mind of a child: innocent, playful, creative, fun.

We adults sometimes feel like those days of playfulness are over. We think back on our childhoods with wistfulness for lost innocence, nostalgia for when life seemed simpler, a craving to recapture that feeling of being carefree, free to indulge in the wild creativity of play. That's why you cried at the end of Toy Story 3, when Andy, now a young man, plays with his toys one last time before putting childish things behind him and moving into adulthood. It's a beautiful, heartbreaking scene.

But is that what God expects of us? Does he really want us to enjoy a brief season of play, as kids, but to realize when we grow up that most of life is actually pure drudgery, and that as adults we're expected to put play behind us and get down to the real work of earning money, raising kids, going to church?

The answer is complicated. The short answer is, "No." As we look at the full counsel of God's word, I think we see that God calls us to a life of deep playfulness and joy. The longer answer, which is the rest of this sermon, teases out what exactly about play, and what *kind* of play, is honoring to God.

Another way of talking about joyful play is to talk of *delighting in God's creation*. I think we can even say that cultivating delight in God's creation is a sort of spiritual discipline. It may sound odd to describe *delighting in creation* as a spiritual discipline. We're used to thinking of the spiritual disciplines as prayer, Bible reading, and fasting. Sort of like eating your broccoli. Everyone knows you have to do, and a few super health food nerds claim to actually like it, but aside from that select priesthood of healthy living nuts, no one actually likes broccoli. So it seems with the spiritual disciplines. They are healthy chores that you're supposed to do but few of us expect to enjoy them.

Well, in fact, we should delight in all spiritual disciplines. We should "Taste and see that the Lord is good." We should find delight in prayer and the Bible. But for today,

I want to focus on cultivating a sense of deep playfulness by delighting in creation in our work, in our fellowship, and in our union with Christ.

## **Creation**

“And God saw that it was good.” In the first chapter of the Bible, God makes everything. He makes light, land, stars, sun, moon, plants, birds, fish, animals, and man and woman. And after each act of creation, after each day, God beholds what he had made and sees that it is good. Six times the authors tells us that God saw it was good. At the end of the chapter, when God is finished making everything, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good,” (v31), like God putting his final and official and complete seal of approval on his handiwork.

Christianity is not like Platonism, Buddhism, or Manichaeism. It is not a religion that sees matter as bad and spirit as good. It does not teach us that our bodies are icky while our souls are pure; that the physical world is corrupt while the invisible world is righteous. We sometimes inherit these assumptions because of elements of Greek philosophy crept into early Christian theology, but they’re not in the Bible. The Bible is very clear from the very first page: God delights in the creation he made. If he made it good, it is not only mistaken, it is actually sin for us to disagree with him. If we denigrate God’s creation, if we disregard the world, if we think physical life is meaningless or this world is worthless, we’re calling him a liar.

God cares about his creation and, especially, about the vice-regents he made and commissioned to exercise dominion within it: men and women. Note that when God makes Adam and Eve, he gives them a command and an authorization. “And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”” (1:28) And in the next chapter, we read that “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it,” (2:15).

This isn’t (merely) a biblical mandate to take up gardening. Rather, it is the Bible using gardening as a metaphor for all of our involvement in creation. This is God’s broad authorization and commissioning for us to take charge of all creation, to joyfully invest our lives and our labor and our creativity and our imagination in making it better. What does it mean to work and keep a garden? It means to do the weeding, watering, the tilling, planting, pruning—to keep watchful care of it for the purpose of bringing forth food and beauty. The goal of gardening is our own nourishment and edification. We care for the world to promote human flourishing. I think this is one difference with childish play: a child’s play has no point other than itself. Some of our “play” so to speak serves to edify and nourish others. I’ll talk more about less “productive” kinds of play in a bit, but we should note that right at the beginning of the Bible we have a commission to work. This is the first and perhaps strongest way for us to delight in God’s creation.

This has implications for everything from how we treat the natural world to how we understand our vocations—but also for how we use our leisure and our rest. If we live in a good creation that the creator God delights in, we ought to take care of this world, tending it and keeping it to honor him. Just like we teach our kids to take care of their stuff and clean up their rooms, we should keep a tidy world.

Also, if we live in a good creation that our Creator God delights in, we ought to view our labor as a privilege of joyfully participating in the ongoing work of cultivating this world. We ought to cultivate towards our work a child's creativity and energy, heedless and unselfconscious. That can be hard in this fallen world when our work is often frustrating and fruitless, but deliberately cultivating that mindset will help you work "as unto the Lord" and probably be more successful in what you do.

We hear every Sunday that City Life exists to renew cities socially, spiritually and culturally with the Gospel of Jesus. This is what we mean: we want to promote human flourishing by helping tend and keep the city so that the people in it live and thrive.

This may sound like I'm talking more about work than play. Isn't play what we get to do when we stop working? Actually, I think that, at its best, work and play merge. We rarely experience this because of the Fall, because of the effects of sin and corruption, but I think in the garden there was little distinction between work and play and in our lives we may experience moments like that. So when I talk about delighting in creation by cultivating and keeping I am talking about paid labor that you do eight hours of the day outside the home. But I am also talking about literally the entire range of non-sinful human activity, paid and unpaid, in the home, at church, at a workplace, tending a literal garden, designing software, writing a book or reading one, caring for children, designing a dress, plowing a field, cooking a meal, teaching a class, marching for justice, patrolling a street—literally everything we do can and should be done with joy, to the Glory of God, in the service of others.

There is a temptation here. Often when we delight in creation through our creative activity, we are tempted to idolatry. We can idolize the work of our hands, or the aspirations we have for what we want to build, or for ourselves, as the builders. That was the sin at the Tower of Babel. God made us like himself, and like him we are creators and builders, and like him we have tremendous power. That means it is always tempting to confuse ourselves with him, or our works with him. God gave us the first Two of the Ten Commandments to remind us to worship him alone, and to put no created thing before him.

Using our lives to tend and keep the world for the flourishing of others is the purpose of our lives. It is the first commandment in the Bible. It's what God created us to do. It's what creation is for. If you came here this morning wondering about the meaning of life, there it is.

**Rest**

Note something else about the creation account. “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.” (2:1-3)

God worked; then he rested. God does not work ceaselessly. Neither should we. Later in the Bible, God commands that we emulate him in his rest.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work...For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

We’ve just enjoyed a whole series of sermons on rest, so I won’t dwell on this point. But, obviously, there is a time to cease work and to deliberately, intentionally, rest. There are bad ways to use rest, which I’ll get to more below. But not to rest at all is unwise.

## **Festivals and Feasts**

There is another kind of play in the Bible, or maybe another way of delighting in creation, that gets a bit closer to the carefree play of children. I think we see a combination of rest and play, intentional activity with the goal of fellowship and mutual joy, with God at its center in ancient Israel’s feasts and festivals. God instructed Israel to celebrate six festivals or feasts throughout the year: Passover, Firstfruits, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Booths. See Leviticus 23.

The festivals commemorated important dates in Israel’s history, such as its exodus from Egypt; marked out the seasons, celebrated the harvest; and gave the people rest from work. Most importantly, they were important religious rituals. They required the Israelites to offer sacrifices to the Lord and perform other ceremonies, like the “blast of trumpets” for the Feast of Trumpets. One, the Day of Atonement, was the most solemn day on the calendar, the day Israel was confronted with its sin and when the high priest offered sacrifices on behalf of the entire nation’s sins—the one day the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies.

Finally, I think it’s fair to say that these festivals were also, in some sense, great big parties. It’s not that different from our calendar of national holidays. Most of us just celebrated last week our very own Festival of Fireworks, complete with a feast—probably roasting tasty animal flesh over a tribal fire—and perhaps a solemn recollection of national history. Thanksgiving is a great feast and a party, but also a time when we corporately express gratitude. Memorial Day is a national party for

some, but also a solemn and sometimes sorrowful remembrance of soldiers' sacrifice, a ritual in our civil religion.

So I think we can probably understand a little of what it was like when Israel engaged in a regular rhythm of celebration and commemoration. Imagine having family Thanksgiving, then going to the county fair, after which everyone went to a really big church service at a revival tent with the entire town in attendance. Reflect that God ordained that his people mark the seasons and pass their time on earth together with periodic parties. He commanded Israel to throw a party every couple months. These feasts and festivals would be a time of fellowship; of great food; of solemn remembrance; of corporate pride and confession; a time of worship, song, prayer, and preaching; and a time of rest and a time of play. God commanded Israel to take a day off and have some fun.

But note that it wasn't senseless fun, idle leisure, purposeless scrolling on Facebook. No, even when God gave them the day off, he gave them a program and a purpose. He specified the sacrifices they were to offer. He gave them specific rituals—like the trumpets, or the booths, shared activity and shared food that would bring people together, create a shared experience and shared memory, a sense of fellowship. Above all, such times were focused on the Lord and on sacrifices at the temple. God's people were always reminded, at all times, even during their national parties, that they were dependent on God.

Our days off aren't to be mere idleness. It actually takes a lot of work to throw a good party. It would have taken quite a lot of work to pull off the feasts and festivals, from cooking to arranging the appropriate sacrifices at the Temple, setting up the tables, arranging for musicians, playing in the band, organizing the flow of events, maybe getting the house and the Temple ready. We have to work hard to have the best playtime. Even watch kids: when they really get into an idea, they will work really hard to pull it off. If you're ever having a really good time somewhere, stop to think about who worked hard to make your fun possible, and go say thank you. If you think there is such a thing as pure carefree fun that no one had to work for, you should volunteer to be the party planner next time.

The best playtime is not mere idleness. The Bible does not look kindly on idleness. This can be one of the temptations of rest and play—sloth and laziness. Paul commands his readers to “admonish the idle,” (1 Thessalonians 5:14) and the Proverbs warn that “an idle person will suffer hunger.” (19:15). Paul “For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.” (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12.) God's command that his people throw a party now and then is no excuse to become a lazy hedonist.

No, even on our days off we should use our time intentionally, with joy, for God's glory and for other's flourishing. That's why Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment

in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25). Our playfulness and joy, like our salvation and our life, is dependent on God, and we should recognize that and give thanks. Partying without gratitude is arrogant hedonism.

That's why we sacrifice 90 minutes of our precious weekend time to come to church, fellowship with one another, hear God's word, and sing his praises. And it takes work to pull this together. Almost all of us here volunteer in some capacity or another to make church happen, from the greeting team to the "Create and restore" team to Kid's Life to the deacons and elders. And if you're not currently volunteering, please talk to me afterwards. We are to use such times not for our own pleasure or indulgence, but to cultivate a delight in creation, invest in shared experiences with others, practice fellowship and hospitality. That is how our play honors God in Christ.

### **Christ and Creation**

Because Jesus Christ is, in fact, at the very center of our rest, our play, our joy, and our delight in his creation.

As we read in the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." (John 1:1-3).

Later, in Colossians: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Colossians 1:15-17)

We started this morning by reflecting on God the Creator, and his delight in his good creation. But God is not a monad; he is a Trinity. Within God are three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are each fully God; they enjoy perfect fellowship among each other within the single being of the Godhead from all eternity, and they each play distinct roles in God's activity towards creation and towards us. The Father is creator and judge; the Spirit regenerates, sanctifies, and empowers. The Son accomplishes our redemption through his death on the cross and resurrection in power.

But God the Son plays another role. God the Father created the universe "through" the Son and "by" the Son. "In him all things hold together." Jesus is the "Word" the "Logos" that undergirds the universe. He is the centering, ordering principle, the glue, the foundation, the permeating, binding, unifying force above, behind, beyond, within all things. Note also that creation is not only by and through Christ—it is "for" Christ. The Father created the universe as a gift for his Son.

There is a symbiotic relationship between how we relate to Christ and how we relate to his creation. Christ is the agent of creation. Creation is a reflection of Christ. As we know Christ more, we will delight in his creation more. Without Christ, we cannot delight in creation properly. To delight in creation properly, we must delight in Christ. We cannot delight in Christ fully without honoring his creation. Honoring Christ while neglecting the world is an empty, monastic spirituality. Loving creation without Christ is purposeless paganism.

Taking joy in our work, engaging in deep playfulness, delighting in creation honor Christ. They help us know Christ better. God reveals himself through creation. Theologians sometimes even speak about God's two revelations of himself: in creation, and in the Bible. The book of nature and the book of Scripture. Knowing the Author and reading his book go together.

And, finally, they help us be like Christ. Jesus was and is full of joy. During his final talks with his disciples, Jesus tells them "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:11). And during his final, high priestly prayer, he prays to the Father, "But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves." (John 17:13)

One of Jesus' last words to his disciples was an encouragement to share his joy.

### **Wedding Feast of the Lamb**

In this life, work is hard. The garden is thorny. We rarely experience those moments when work and play merge and our labor is playful and deep and productive and fruitful. More so, our moments of rest are plagued with temptation—to sloth, idleness, addiction, and more.

Praise God, then, that we can look forward to the great party in the new creation.

"Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

"Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.  
Let us rejoice and exult  
and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his Bride has made herself ready;  
it was granted her to clothe herself  
with fine linen, bright and pure"—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." (Revelation 19:6-9)

Weddings are great occasions. They are part ceremony and ritual. The bride wears white; she processes down the aisle; she is given away by her father to her groom; the officiant offers words of celebration, instruction, and warning; they recite vows and exchange rings; and then, in the presence of all, a new marriage is created.

Then, they throw a great big party.

What's great about wedding receptions is that you get a ton of great food; you get to see old friends from way back who traveled far for your special occasion; and everybody cuts loose and dances to silly wedding music. It's about the best fun you can expect to have.

Then the bride and groom leave and have even more fun.

Isn't it interesting that when the apostle John had a vision of the new creation beyond death, when God gave him a glimpse into the final and ultimate realities that await us all in Christ, the vision was of a great big party?

Our union with Christ is likened to a wedding. We, the church, are his bride. Heaven is envisioned as the marriage between Christ and the church. Paradise is Christ's wedding party. We will spend eternity in deep playful joy, fellowshiping with one another, delighting in the new creation, in the presence of Christ, the Word of God, the agent of creation, the king of all, the head of the church.

One reason for us to engage in deep playfulness here in this life, and I think one reason God commanded Israel to do so in its festivals and feasts, is to get a foretaste of what God has promised. It can be easy to lose sight of why we do this—why we go to church, read the Bible, say prayers. Sometimes it can feel like we're going through the motions, and our trust in Christ can grow to feel stale. God wants to be sure that we remember he is the source of *joy*, of meaning and purpose. When we taste God-focused joy, it reminds us of what God has for us, what he has promised.

Cultivating joy and delight in the good things God has given us—without sloth and without idolatry—is a spiritual discipline that can refresh our spirits, encourage our faith, bring us closer to our Lord and to each other. It is a taste of heaven itself.