

# The Challenges of Play – Manuscript

Ecclesiastes 2; Romans 5

## Introduction

This morning, we are continuing through this series on Rest and Play, and I have to be honest – when Jonathan first told about this series, I immediately thought, “If you spend 8 weeks talking about rest and play, you’re going to turn everyone at City Life into a bunch of lazy bums. They won’t do anything.” But, as I thought about it more, I realized how important this topic is for us. It seems that we are a people that is never truly at rest. No matter how much fun we have, how much time off we get, how much we accomplish, restful ease in our hearts remains unfamiliar to us. I don’t think this is what God wants for you and me – for his church. Rather than living under the weight of busy anxiety, Jesus tells us to cast our burdens on him and rest. Rather than looking to the trite pleasures of conspicuous consumption, God wants us to delight in his creation, centered on him, in restful play. These are lessons that we all need to learn a little better. So I’m excited to be on this short journey with you as we consider God’s intent for rest and play.

Last week, you guys cracked open the topic of Play. You asked the question, “Does God actually desire for us to play? And if so, what is the biblical sense of play that he desires for us?” This is an interesting and difficult question because “play” is not very explicit in Scripture. It’s not like one of the 10 Commandments is “Thou shalt play and have fun.” Though we don’t see the word “play” explicitly in Scripture, we do see all throughout Scripture that God’s desire for us is to live in joy and delight in God’s creation.

If you haven’t listened to last week’s sermon, Paul did a great job of showing us how God desires for us to joyfully delight in his creation through our work, our fellowship, and ultimately through our union and relationship with Christ. It was actually really striking to see how delight in God, celebration, and joy are all critical elements to the Christian life! Even the final scene of Scripture is described as a wedding feast full of celebration and joy! So let’s all breath another huge sigh of relief – God wants us to play and enjoy the world. Play is absolutely a part of the holistic human life that God has created us to live. God has created us to play.

And yet...just like all of creation, the way we engage in play is utterly broken. From the first moment of rebellious sin against God in the garden, all humanity and all creation have been fractured under the weight and curse of sin. There is not one aspect of human life that is not touched by sin. Because of this reality, we struggle to play and delight in creation in the way that God intended.

And the truth is, we are all in different places in this room, and we all struggle with play in different ways. Maybe you are here thinking, “I really have no problem playing and having fun?” I’m there too. But maybe you’ve also found that your constant play has failed to bring depth of joy to your life. Or, maybe you are someone that struggles to step away from work to simply engage in free play with your family or friends. You can’t turn off your work physically or mentally to play with others. Others of us may feel the weight of brokenness

in our world (especially recently!) and wonder, “How can we be playful and joyful people when there is so much suffering around us?” Today we are going to take a closer look at those challenges to play. Knowing that God has created us to play in such a way that delights in his goodness in creation, why do we find it difficult to play? Or, why does our approach to play fail to lead us into lasting joy?

*To answer these questions, I want to focus on three challenges that are central to our ability to playfully delight in God and his creation: the challenge of joy, the challenge of meaning, and the challenge of hope.* Hopefully, by the end of this morning we’ll walk away with greater clarity and greater ability to engage in restful play the way God wants for us. Let’s start with the challenge of joy. Read along with me in [Ecclesiastes 2:1-11](#).

I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” 3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. 4 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. 9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

### **Challenge of Joy**

*The first challenge of play is the challenge of joy. Many of us have no problem playing, but we fail to arrive at true joy in our play because we believe play itself to be the source of joy. We find this to be utterly clear in the life of Solomon in Ecclesiastes. King Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes, has every resource to fill his life with every pleasure imaginable. The dude is rich, and he chases play and pleasure to its fullest extent. He fills his life with laughter and wine. He builds palaces and parks to enjoy. He acquires better and greater possessions to experience. He brings singers and artists into his house. He gets more wives and concubines looking to enjoy more sex. He took whatever his eyes desired. And after he tried everything, tested every type of pleasure in life, he found that it was all a vanity. It was meaningless. It left him totally empty.*

Of course, our lives are not exactly like Solomon’s. If you are anything like me, you are not rich. We don’t have every resource to pursue pleasure and self-indulgence to the extent

that he did, and perhaps you think that you would not have gone as far as he did; *but the truth is that so many of us look to pleasure and play with the exact same motivation as Solomon. We indulge in every pleasure we can afford, on our modest salaries, looking to arrive at a joyful life.*

Austin is an extremely unique city. It is filled with opportunities for fun and pleasure at every corner. We have great restaurants and food to enjoy. We have killer music and culture to give us endless entertainment. We have beautiful parks in Zilker and the greenbelt. Strangely, though we may not be as rich as Solomon, we can fill our lives with fun and play at every turn. The reality is, these opportunities are so prevalent, and such a part of our culture, that we often start looking for deep joy in play without even realizing. *We can subtly drift into filling our lives with fun experiences in such a way that we begin to actually believe that joy in life is found in our play. We begin to functionally believe that play is the true source of joy.*

While I love everything this city has to offer and believe that God “[richly provides us everything to enjoy](#)” as Paul says, I also know that these pleasures will not provide the depth of joy we long for in life. Maybe you have experienced that to be true as well. Maybe you have had an experience like Solomon where you indulged deeply in play and pleasure, and at the end found it unsatisfying. I know that I certainly have. I remember very vividly going to ACL last fall and having this kind of experience.

One of the things I love most about Austin is the music in this city. I love music and I love going to shows. So, one of my favorite weekends of the year is ACL weekend. I have a bunch of friends come into town and we spend three full days hanging out in the sun, having a blast, and listening to great music. There is nothing better! Even though I love ACL, I remember last year on Sunday night, after everything was said and done, having an enormous sense of the vanity of that experience. I was back at my house after a great weekend with friends, seeing great live music, and I felt a tremendous sense of disappointment. It was that feeling like, “It this it?” I just had one of the most fun experiences of my life and instead of joy and contentment, I felt a weird level of despair and emptiness. *I realized I had subtly started to believe that this fun experience of play, of friends and music, would bring this deep sense of joyful contentment to my life that play itself can never provide.* Have you had an experience like that? Maybe after returning from a great vacation that you were really looking forward to. Or maybe after a great night with your family and friends, you were left with the same feeling of emptiness. Maybe you felt the similar question, “Is this it? Is this where joy and satisfaction in life is supposed to come from?”

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard describes a character he calls Don Juan. And Don Juan, similar to Solomon, denies himself no pleasure. For him, the pleasure he pursues is sex. He chases women and makes sexual pleasure the primary aim of his life. Kierkegaard tells us that Don Juan is left in utter despair. *He is left in despair because all the aesthetic pleasures and experiences of life that he has are unable to provide the deepest levels of joy and satisfaction that he seeks.* Instead, the seeking after pleasure becomes not a way for him to reach joy, but a way for him to simply combat boredom in life. When we look to play and

pleasure as the primary source of joy in life, we'll find ourselves perpetually bored, never satisfied, and always looking for the next experience to satiate our longing for something new and novel. When we pursue play for the sake of play itself, we wrongly believe that our playful activities are the source of true and lasting joy. Like Solomon and Don Juan, we will be left in utter emptiness and despair.

This is because play itself can never satisfy us. Only God is the true source of joy. In verses 24-25 of Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon affirms the goodness of enjoying the good things in life, but he centers it all on God. He says that all good things are *"from the hand of God"* and that *"the one who pleases God he has given wisdom, knowledge, and joy."* ***For play and delight in creation to find its true place, to play its very real part in bringing joy to life, it must fall underneath worship. Play colored by worship is what will allow us to enter into true rest and joy.*** Why is this? Because recognizing God as the source of all good things in our play produces gratitude and gratitude leads to joyful worship of the giver of all good things. When we look to God as the source of joy in life and allow our play to be colored with worship, we'll be able to enjoy people, vacations, shows, time with our kids, food, and all these things appropriately in light of God and his provision. We'll be able to enjoy good things at their proper time, and will also be able to say "no" when it's not the right time – because we aren't counting on them for joy! I want to challenge you to search your own heart this morning and ask, "Have I been looking to play and fun experiences to fill my life with joy rather than God?" Perhaps this can be a moment of repentance and new faith in God for joy in life. ***Play and pleasure for their own sakes will only lead you to boredom and despair, but worship of God in the midst of play will lead you to joy.*** Play will only lead to true joy when it is colored with gratitude and worship to God.

### **Challenge of Meaning**

*The second challenge of play is the challenge of meaning. While some of us may overindulge in play and still miss joy, others of us avoid play because we believe our work to be the true source of meaning in life. Let's read [Ecclesiastes 2:18-23](#).*

[18] I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, [19] and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. [20] So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, [21] because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. [22] What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? [23] For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

Here, Solomon has seen the through the empty promises of a life of self-indulgence and has sought after meaning in his work. After considering all the labor and toil of his hands, everything he had worked for, he shares this immense frustration with his work. He says he hated all his toil because he has to leave it to someone else to enjoy. He gives himself up to despair over his labor and says that all he has is despair, sorrow, and vexation. In the same

way that Solomon is left with emptiness after pursuing self-indulgence, he is also left with emptiness after pursuing a life of productive work.

Perhaps you are similar to Solomon. You have seen through the empty promises that pleasure and play will lead to a meaningful life, so you have poured yourself into your projects – whether it is business, art, parenting, or even ministry. Maybe you’ve thought to yourself, “The road to meaning and fulfillment isn’t found in pleasure alone, but it’s found in doing something of value for the world!” So you work long hours, you fill your mind and time with things that are going to make you better and more effective; you give yourself to your work. Maybe you are so focused on your work and productivity that you find it difficult to play and rest. You struggle to turn off physically and mentally to simply enjoy God and creation – because it doesn’t seem productive. If you are driven by your work, it’s likely that you are missing out delighting in God and his creation the way he intends for you through play. Why can I say that with confidence? Because delighting in God and his creation requires that you *slow down*.

The truth is, slowing down to play and be at leisure with God and others is actually productive for our spirit. One author writing on leisure, Leonard Doohan, says, *“To fail to see the value of simply being with God and doing nothing is to miss the heart of Christianity. We need to be at leisure with God...No authentic spirituality exists without leisure.”* No authentic spirituality exists without leisure! Without slowing down to enjoy restful play delighting in God there is no authentic spirituality! Slowing down to delight in God in restful play is critical for true spirituality, but so many of us are driven by our work so much that we can’t put down the phone, turn off the mind, and turn our attention to God or others. Why is this so hard for us?

I want to use an example from my dad’s life that is sort of comical but touches on the root of this struggle to separate ourselves from work in order to rest and play. About a year ago, my parents moved from the extremely diverse and culturally rich city of Temple, TX to Manhattan. They retired and decided to sell the house to move up there to help plant a church with a pastor and a few other folks. Pretty wild, but awesome! As you can imagine, this brought a lot of changes to their life. My dad left a job as a pediatrician in a clinic where he worked for 25 years (I know any millennial in here is freaking out over the thought of 25 years in one job!) and a community where people knew him and respected him. In Temple, people knew him as our dad, a doctor, and elder at our church. In New York City, nobody knows him. They don’t know that he was a doctor. They don’t know that he was a father to us. They don’t know that he was a leader in the church. It’s a total blank slate. As you can imagine, a move like that causes you to ask all kinds of questions: “Who am I? Where do I fit in this society? What are the things that I bring to the table?”. Well, he started coaching a kids’ soccer team in his neighborhood, and I remember him telling me on the phone how one day, walking down the busy streets of NYC he ran into one of his kids. The kid grabbed his mom’s hand and was saying, “Look mom look! That’s my coach!” My dad was so happy that this kid recognized him as his coach that he hurried back home called us up and told us about it. After he finished I was like, “What’s the point? Why are you so happy about this?” And he said, “I just felt like a somebody again.”

Now, it's funny to think a 7 year old recognizing you as his coach could make you feel like "a somebody," but it reveals a deep desire that each of us have. We all want to be "a somebody." We all want to have this confidence in our mind that we are significant, that we matter, that we have something to offer. There are even billboards all around Austin saying to "Be a Somebody!" For so many of us, we believe that the way to prove our significance, to be "a somebody," comes through our work. We work feverishly in order to gain significance. We think that if we just get our business to the next level then we'll be notable and worth something. We work on our art thinking that if we just make something beautiful that people love then our life will be meaningful. Even in parenting, we think that if we can just parent our kids perfectly so they are successful, then we'll be good enough. Or we work hard in ministry thinking that if people find me a compelling leader, if I baptize enough people or launch enough City Groups, then I'll be significant, feel good about myself, and know that I am "a somebody."

Don't get me wrong – I want us to be a people that works hard for the glory of God in business, art, parenting, and ministry, but if we are hanging the weight of our significance on our work, we will be utterly destroyed by despair and will miss out on the ability to delight in God and his creation in restful play. Like Solomon, not only will you find the end of your work to be despair, but you'll also bear the heavy burden of your own significance on your shoulders and you will never be at rest – Solomon says that ["even in the night his heart does not rest."](#) Author Paul Stevens says this about Christians, "Good Christians are active in the church, and are known for their sacrificial activity rather than their experience of rest...Activity, industry, individualism, thrift, ambition, and success have been regarded as important virtues, with work considered to be the criterion for measuring human worth."

Let's not buy into the lie this morning that work is the ultimate criterion for measuring human worth. If this is something you struggle with, if you are perpetually burdened under the weight of proving your significance through your work. If you find it impossible to set the work aside (either physically or mentally!), I want to remind you this morning that the center of your worth, the most important and definitive thing about you is what Jesus has to say. And if you are in Christ, you are a son or daughter of the living God. You are his servant, and an ambassador for the Gospel in this city. God loves you. And that status, that significance which is the truest thing about you, is not something you can earn, but is something that has already been earned for you by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. You are significant because of Jesus has laid down his life and has risen for you.

***What that means is that we can put down the laptops and phones, we can get on the floor with our kids, we can go out and delight in the goodness of God and his creation in restful play. When we are fully rested in our significance in Christ, we are set free to play and delight in creation in light of God's goodness and provision for us.*** I think we are also free to work better! No longer are we depending on work for our personal significance, so we can work with a lot more joy and freedom, laying aside the added burdens and stress.

So what can we do to cultivate a lifestyle, a way of being and living that encourages restful play in light of God's goodness and provision? This is not just a click in the head, but cultivating this truth in our lives is a practice. Primarily, you need to cultivate practices in your life that remind you of your identity and significance in Christ, based on his work, not on your own. This means postponing work to spend time in scripture and engaging with God in prayer. This also means rearranging your time to be a part of a City Group or do devotionals with your family. This means simply cutting off your work to do totally "unproductive" things as you play with your kids and spend time with others in restful play. *It takes both resting inwardly in our identity as loved children of God and resting outwardly through our practices to be able to truly delight in God through play. **When we find meaning in life in Jesus and cultivate practices of rest from that reality, then we'll be able to play the way God intended.***

### **The Challenge of Hope**

The third and final challenge of play that we are going to look at today is the challenge of hope. I want to touch on this, but I am also going to be brief so the next folks preaching can dive in a bit more.

A lot of us wonder how we can be a playful people, a joyful people, when the world is full of so much brokenness and suffering - especially in light of recent events. Shootings in Orlando, St. Paul, Louisiana, and Dallas. The attack in France. Families and friends grieving; struggling with injustice; filled with anger, fear, and confusion. Things have been very heavy and difficult lately. Shouldn't we just be in perpetual grief? Shouldn't we be filled with sorrow? How is it even appropriate to be a playful people?

While there is certainly a time to grieve; while we should be broken hearted over the sin and death that fills our world; we can still be playful and joyful people because of the hope we have in Jesus. Let's read [Romans 5:1-5](#).

[1] Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. [2] Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, **and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.** [3] Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, [4] and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, [5] and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

In this passage, Paul is telling Christians that we have been declared right and now have peace with God in Christ. He says we have gained access to the grace of God, in which we are currently standing now, *and that we rejoice in the hope of the glory God*. The hope of the glory of God is the reason we can rejoice and engage in play! The hope of the glory of God is reason we can delight in creation even when brokenness and suffering are all around us. Habakkuk speaks of a day when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea." We have hope that not only we, but all of creation will be

restored to God as his glory fills every corner of creation. This hope demands that we rejoice and delight in the good things that God has done in play!

The power of this joy available to us in hope is so strong that Paul says it even leads us to rejoice in suffering. In suffering we are pointed to hope, and our hope is secure because of the unfailing love of God given to us through his Spirit. ***Hope in Jesus and his ultimate redemption in the world is the only thing that allows us to be deeply playful people in a broken world.*** *But to enter in to that joy and hope we have to repent. We have to repent from putting our hope in shallow pleasures to bring us joy, we have to repent from putting our hope in our own accomplishments to bring us meaning in life, and we have to repent from our failure to hope in Jesus. Then, we have to turn in faith to believe that Jesus is the only one worthy of our hope.*

I know we are all in different places today. I know some of us overplay in our search for joy, others of us underplay under the weight of finding meaning in work, and still others of us fluctuate between the two. Whatever place you are in right now, I want to leave you with some practical advice.

If you are someone who has been looking to fun and pleasure to bring you joy in life, I want you to consider Christ, look for joy and satisfaction in him – then consider how worship recolors your approach to play. If you are someone who has struggled to play because of your work, I want you to postpone your work for worship. And cut off your work for leisure with God and creation. If you are someone that simply struggles to be a playful, joyful person in the midst of life and hardship. I want you to consider the hope we have in Jesus. The hope of personal and cosmic reconciliation. A day when all things will be made new, every wrong made right, every injustice brought to justice, and every tear wiped away. I want you to consider the marriage supper of the lamb – where we are all gathered around the throne of God in worshipful play and celebration.