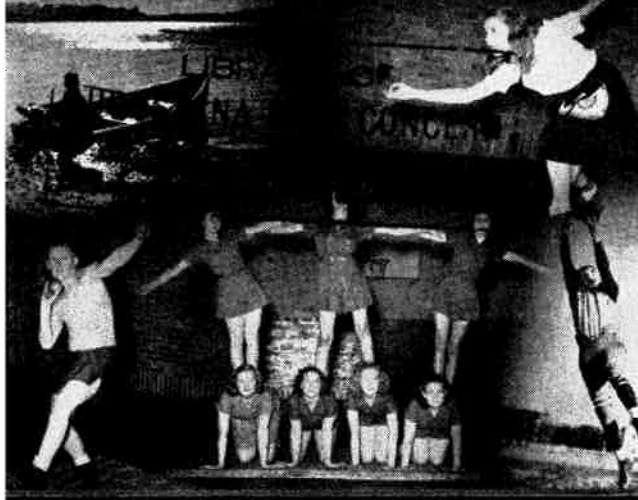




**A CHRISTIAN
AND HIS
AMUSEMENTS**
BY
John P. Milton



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Is there a place in the Christian life for amusements of any kind?

We believe that there is. Entertainment in some form or other is needed in every human life if that life is not to lose its freshness. We need to play as well as to pray. We need to rest as well as to work. Especially is this true when we are still young. The mark of the Christian life is not the renunciation of all play and pleasure, but the choice of such pleasures as are wholesome and clean.

There are many forms of entertainment which are not denied the Christian. There are some, however, against which the Christian Church has been constrained to speak out in kind but earnest warning. Among these amusements of the wrong kind are the dance, the theater, and cards.

What Is Wrong with the Dance?

If this question is to be answered with profit to anyone, it must be answered plainly. There is much that is wrong with the dance, but it is true that we sometimes content ourselves with saying that the dance is wrong. It is only fair that we who believe it to be wrong should point out the reason or the reasons why. There is the more necessity for this since there is no Biblical prohibition against dancing as there is against

theft, or murder, or adultery. If there were such a prohibition against dancing, it would settle the matter for a Christian, who believes in the authority of the Bible as God's Word. As it is, we must apply *the moral principles* of the Bible to the dance and see if it can stand the test.

The chief reason for condemning the dance may be put in the words of Jesus, "By their fruits ye shall know them." It stands condemned by its fruits. A second reason is found in its evil associations. A third reason is the fact that the lure of the dance consists in its appeal to that which is sensuous, if not sensual.

The Spirit of Worldliness

Having thus stated the case, let me present a few facts to prove my points. But first let me ask a question of the reader. Have you read your Bible often and sympathetically enough to have caught the spirit of what it says about "the world" and about the attitude of the believer toward it? Read John 17. 14-16. Evidently Jesus discerned a spirit of the world from which His disciples must be completely separated. In the parable of the Sower and the Seed He speaks of "the pleasures of this life" as being among the thorns that choke the seed of the Word and make it unfruitful (Luke 8. 14). Read also 1 John 2. 15-17, with its clear and emphatic warning, "Love not the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in

him." Another passage that should be read in this connection is 2 Corinthians 6. 14—7. 1, a passage which all too many Christians do not want to face. "Touch no unclean thing." "Beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." In James's classic definition of pure religion (James 1. 27), keeping oneself "unspotted from the world" is given equal emphasis with the duty of good works, such as helping the afflicted. Who can read these passages from the Holy Scriptures, and many more, from the beginning of the Bible to its end, without understanding what James so bluntly states, "Ye adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever, therefore, would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God" (James 4. 4).

Do not begin your consideration of the dance or of any other earthly pleasure by minimizing this emphasis which God has placed on the seductive danger of *worldliness* as an enemy of true godliness. True, what I have said so far *does not prove dancing*, or any other form of pleasure, *an evil*; but I know from experience that if this point of "the friendship of the world" being "enmity with God" is clearly understood and accepted, there is little difficulty in determining where the dance belongs.

Where, then, does it belong? (1) What is its spirit? (2) Which are its associations?

(3) What are its fruits? These are the three questions which will determine its character.

The Spirit of the Dance

First, then, as to *its spirit*. I shall not mince words. The dance as such is sensuous, and it appeals to that in us which is sensual. We will concede that there is no sin until and unless the individual in his heart yields to the temptation to impurity. We will grant also that there may be individuals who can successfully overcome this temptation. It may be quite true that the mere act of dancing is a temptation rather than a sin. But does this alter the situation greatly? To play with temptation is also wrong; and few who do play with temptation are as strong to resist it as they think. The spirit of dancing is sensuous. Many who once loved the dance have admitted, when once their eyes were opened, that it caters to sexual passion. How long think you the dance would retain its popularity if the sexes had to dance by themselves? Especially of the modern dance is it true that the close bodily embrace is the rule rather than the exception; and the very motions involved are often such as to excite unrestrained lustful emotions. The unprincipled worldling will admit that it is so; and the fact can easily be confirmed by observation, as well as from much of the literature of the day which features the dance and reveals it in its sensuous charac-

ter. Why, then, should the Christian run the risk of exposing himself to this powerful temptation to sensuality in thought and in deed, even though he is confident that he himself can resist the temptation and retain his personal purity untouched? Why should he even desire to share in a pleasure which is so peculiarly the pleasure of the world? I am not denying that there is a difference between the dance in a public dance hall and a dance in a private home, or between dancing in a circle of friends and dancing with any stranger who comes along; outward circumstances may aggravate the evil, but in any case the appeal to sensuality is there.

The Associations of the Dance

Then, too, we do not forget the associations that so naturally and invariably cling to the dance in its public form. The dance hall and the brothel are friends of long standing. So are dancing and drinking and brawling. The notoriety of the American "roadhouse" or "tavern" is a blot on the fair name of a nation that wants to be known as Christian. But what is the stock-in-trade of a typical roadhouse? Dancing, drinking, gambling, and sometimes prostitution! You may say that dancing does not need to keep this company. If kept separate, is it not permissible; is it not clean? There is more truth, however, than many concede, in the old proverb, "Birds of a feather flock together." The evil associa-

tions of the dance, coupled with its own sensuous, tempting character, should be sufficient to warn any earnest Christian, who knows how hard it is to keep oneself unspotted from the world, against it. At the very least, it should be sufficient to rule out any participation of the Christian in the public dance; and the clearer our Christian insight becomes in the things that pertain to the sanctified life, the less likely will we be to attempt fine distinctions between the public and the private dance.

The Fruits of the Dance

There is a third reason why the dance should be condemned: its fruits. These are of two kinds, moral delinquency and spiritual indifference. There have been enough investigations to prove that the dance has started many a girl and boy on the broad way that leads to destruction. Parents have given this testimony of their children. The children themselves have testified to the same thing. As a pastor, I have had vivid reminders of what the dance can do in contributing to the moral delinquency of youth.

Yet, I am not most concerned about the fruit of immorality in all its vicious forms. Many may succeed in avoiding this, although their example may be a stumbling block impelling the weaker comrade along to ruin. But as a pastor I have had better opportunity to observe how love for the dance has helped to stifle and to kill the warm spiritual life of faith, and love, and

obedience to the will of Christ. I confess I have never met a person that loved the dance whose life and personality confessed Christ boldly and without shame. Invariably it has led to a half-hearted or to an indifferent attitude toward all the heart-searching demands of Jesus. Has it ever happened that a person on the dance floor has sought to persuade another to accept Jesus as a personal Saviour? When a young man can tell me that he has done this I will believe him when he says that he can take Jesus with him to the dance. On the contrary, I have found that the dance is what Jesus said the pleasures of this life are, thorns that help to choke the Word of God and the spiritual life. They lead away from Christ and from salvation. They do not aid in the realization of that word of Jesus, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5. 8). I have not said, and I will not say, that it is impossible for one to dance and to be a Christian; but I will say without fear of contradiction that it makes it harder for one to be a Christian; and all too often it leads entirely away from Christ and into the world. It would do us good to meditate more than we do on the word of Jesus when He was asked, "Lord, are they few that are saved?" This was His reply, "Strive to enter in by the narrow door: for many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able" (Luke 13. 24).

What Is Wrong with the Theater?

Personally I would make a fundamental distinction between the movie, or the theater, and the dance, in classifying them both as predominantly evil. The very nature of the dance is such as to make it a temptation to sin under any circumstance, even the best. In the case of the movie, however, and of the theater generally, we are dealing with something which might be a blessing, though it is often the very opposite. There is no inherent wrong in impersonating another or in acting out a scene from real or imaginary life. Conceivably, dramatics could be an influence for good as much as oratory or preaching. So also the projecting of a picture on a screen, whether a still or moving picture, is certainly not wrong in itself. It all depends on the nature of the picture and of the play. The curse of the movie and of the theater lies in the fact that they are in the hands of those who are more concerned about money than about morals; who cater consciously to the fact that more people prefer that which is evil than that which is good. Why should not people be given what they want in the way of entertainment, the reformer is told; and to the mercenary mind, the only index to what the people want is the measure of the gate receipts.

The spirit of the American movie today is largely anti-Christian. We indict it on the general ground of worldliness, which is at enmity with what the Bible tells us a

Christian should make the center of his thoughts: "Brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Phil. 4. 8).

Specifically, there are two great evils in the modern American movie: the portrayal of crime, gangdom, and force, as if these were heroic, and the presentation of love and marriage as if it were an eternal round of lust and passion. More than one teenage boy has confessed that he received the incentive to a short-lived career in crime from the movies. Whether by carelessness or design the picture that he saw left in his mind a halo of glory over the criminal's activities. It helped to break down his respect for moral authority and his obedience to moral standards. When it comes to love and marriage, the theater is reflecting, and by reflex action lowering, the prevalent low moral level which is reflected also in a mass of magazines and novels of the day. Insofar as this judgment is true of them, it would seem self-evident that both are to be condemned and shunned by the Christian.

Are there, then, no good plays which we may select, while we leave the others alone? Presumably so; at least, some are much better than others. In my personal counseling with young folks I have stressed the same approach to moving pictures as to

literature: First, a careful selection of the picture to be seen, or of the book and magazine to be read; second, an equally careful discrimination between the true and the false, or between the good and the evil, in that which they do see or read. For in the theater even at its best you must be prepared to find a mixture of good and bad, a mingling peculiar to the ways of the world which can not see the difference. If the Christian is to attend the theater at all, he will need to exercise the most careful discrimination between that which is good and that which is bad. If he begins to look closely with the mind of Christ, I know that he will see too much that is wrong to become a very ardent patron of the theater. Even though there is some truth to the argument that we have no more right to shun realism in the realm of letters and pictures than we do in life itself, where the evil and the good are also frequently intermingled, yet it must be pointed out that the realism of the theater is all too often superficial and therefore tends to confuse moral values. We do not find fault with it so much for portraying the evil with the good, but rather for leaving the spectator with a wrong impression of what is good. Realism does not mean the same as reveling in sin and smut; nor does it require that we be left in the dark as to what is right in order to be realistic in our approach to life.

Is there, then, no hope of rescuing the theater from its low moral level and to

cleanse it from its evils? Perhaps. The Christian should certainly give support to every honest effort in that direction. It is a gigantic task, however. That which is evil often pays better than that which is good. A few years ago there was much newspaper talk about cleaning up the film industry. Was it done? Not if signboards are true indexes of the present state of affairs. The truth about this pretended cleanup of movie morals was vividly revealed in a series of five articles on the subject that were published in *The Christian Century*. Reprints may still be available; if so, they will do more than anything that I have said or could say here to show the true character of the movie. As an industry, whatever may be said of individual pictures, it is a menace to American youth and a foe of Christianity.

What Is Wrong with Card Playing?

Much of what has been said about the dance and the theater applies also to card playing. Of all three it must be said that it is not the act itself that constitutes the sin, but the fact that the act is so closely related to that which is sin as to make the sin in many cases almost inevitable.

There are especially two evils connected with the playing of cards. The one is gambling. That gambling and card playing are bosom companions needs no proof. The fact is too well known. But again it may be urged that the two can be separated.

This is quite true. They can be separated; but how often are they? It is no secret that petty gambling is a frequent accompaniment of card playing even in the homes. And petty gambling is as really gambling as that on a larger scale, besides being the first step that often leads to the evil career of the gambler. If you are a Christian, you will want to call a halt somewhere along the way. Where is the easiest place to stop? Is it not easier to say from the start, "I don't play cards," than to say later when in the midst of a card game, "I will not gamble?" One step so easily leads to another: card playing (innocent it might seem, in itself) to petty gambling, and this to gambling of a more sordid nature.

But is the card game so innocent even in itself, when no gambling is directly connected with it? I believe there is a deeper and more fundamental criticism which can be made than this, that it has evil associations. I have often been asked why I make a distinction between cards and such games as checkers and chess, which can also become the tool of the gambler. As someone has said, you can gamble on anything, even on sacred things. My own line of distinction has ever been between that which is by nature a game of chance and that which is predominantly a game of mental or of physical skill. Card playing is essentially a game of chance, of luck; and as such it arouses and fosters a gambling spirit which is dangerous even when there is no actual

gambling. One of the participants in the "Bridge Battle of the Century" fought a few years ago made the significant admission later that bridge, for instance, was largely a game of chance. I do not believe that any game in which the element of chance is the controlling factor is consistent with Christian faith and conduct. It is consistent only with that spirit of unbelief which is so prevalent today; which thinks of the universe and all that is in it as the product of a chance evolution rather than of a purposive divine creation. From such a spirit the Christian needs to guard himself most earnestly.

One thing more might be said about card playing. It seems to possess a fascination for some people like that of wine. It masters them like the craving for strong drink enslaves some. It may not affect you that way, nor may it affect numberless others; but your example and invitation may be a stumbling block to one who has not your powers of self-control. This, too, the Christian should be most anxious to avoid, remembering what Jesus said about offenses.

A Final Question

In view of what has been said, can anyone be a true Christian and at the same time indulge in such amusements as dancing and card playing and indiscriminate movie-going?

I believe that there are Christians who do practice these things as also other things

that are sinful or questionable, not perceiving wherein they are wrong. They are not in the same class as murder, theft, or adultery, which are labeled by the Word of God as sin. There can be no difference of opinion about that which is named in Scripture as sin. By the Christian, at least, such must be acknowledged as sin. When we are concerned with practices which are not so named, of which the Bible, indeed, says nothing at all, we may be just as certain that the thing is wrong, but it is not so sure that the person who does this thing is sinning willfully. If he does not sin willfully, is it not possible for him to be a Christian? Such an admission by no means puts the stamp of approval on that which he does. It simply admits that it is possible to be a Christian although ignorant of the full intention of God's will for the Christian life.

But let us underscore the little word "true" before "Christian." It may seem strange at first to speak of "Christians" and of "true Christians," yet we will admit that there are different stages of Christian growth, in the discernment of God's will, and in spiritual power. It has been my observation that when a Christian becomes deeply concerned about his life in relation to Jesus—not only to ask the first question, "What must I do to be saved?" but also the second which is like unto it, "What wouldest Thou have me do, Lord, now that I am saved?"—the practices mentioned (dancing, etc.) become sinful. And again,

with those who practice them, professing to be unable to see what is wrong therein, they certainly are not a help but a hindrance in the way of that whole-hearted, joyous consecration to Christ as Saviour which ought to mark a Christian. The praying, testifying, soul-winning, rejoicing-in-the-Lord Christian (as I know him) finds it impossible to continue indulgence in these amusements of the world. I confess that I have never met a person that had experienced the full joy of salvation in Christ who cared any longer for the old amusement life. Its glamour was gone. But I have met many "churchly" people who stare at you with mixed amazement and resentment when you ask if they have accepted Jesus as their personal Saviour, and who wonder what is wrong with the dance, or with the theater, or with cards. Your amusement life will take care of itself when you have agonized through to personal peace with God through the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus will not forbid you to play, but He does ask you to bring also your play under that splendid rule of life which characterizes the true Christian. "Whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3. 17).

"And as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (Galatians 6. 16).

Will you submit your amusements to this "rule" of Christ?