**SERIES 02 (PREACHED IN 1900) - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**06. THE ETHICS OF AMUSEMENT by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*"All things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's."*

*1 Corinthians 3:21-23*

*"God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy."*

*1 Timothy 6:17*

IN APPROACHING this subject we have to deal with inferences rather than with direct commands. There are very many subjects upon which the Word of God is silent as to details, as to rules and regulations. God never gives a man anything in its finality. He does not give us bread in its finality. He gives the corn bearing seed after its kind, and we must smite the earth with toil if we would have it smile back in harvest. There must be cooperation between man and God if man is to get the best out of any divine gift. On this same principle about many things we do not find in the Word of God detailed instructions, cast iron rules, but we do find principles which it is our business as children of the King to apply to all the varying necessities of our lives, and if we are prepared to seek those principles and to live according to them, we need go wrong in no department of our daily life.

I believe that when my life is handed over to Jesus Christ I find it. All the possibilities of my being I discover and possess in Him. Nothing in me that is part of the original creation of God is lost to me when I pass into relation to Christ; all that He denies me is that which has been imparted to my life and character by an enemy; the sin, the wrong, the harm is all that I lose. God never makes half measures. If He gives a bird a wing, there is air in which the wing is to be poised. And if God has given to me capacity for play, He means me to play; and it is wrong for anyone to stultify in me what is a God-given capacity. We have too long approached this subject of recreation from the wholly destructive side and have not attempted within the church to construct a theory out of the principles of revealed religion which shall condition for our young people this God-given capacity for amusement.

In regard to amusement there are two extremes. There is the ascetic view of life, which finds expression in this phrase, "I die daily," and there is the view of the voluptuary, which finds expression in the phrase, "Tomorrow we die." Either one, as the perpetual and only motto of your life, causes you to miss life's meaning. But the apostle said, "I die daily." Yes, but if you imagine that to be all the apostle said, you have utterly misunderstood the very genius of his life and action. The apostle said, "I have been crucified." Some people never get beyond that first part of the verse, but he only said that to lead to the next, "Nevertheless I live." It is as if he had said, "Let no man imagine that my Christianity is a death; it is life; I live." Then he reveals the nature of his life, "Yet not I; but Christ liveth in me; and the life I now live," not in spirit, but "in flesh," "I live in faith, faith in the Son of Who loved me, and gave Himself for me. " That is the whole program of life, and within the scope of it lies every God-given power bestowed upon man.

The other extreme view of life is the view of the man who sees nothing but pleasure anywhere, and he says, "Tomorrow I die." That man is a coward; he dare not face the grim tremendous reality of dissolution; he puts it off till tomorrow, and lives in a fool's paradise, playing with the things that perish, and missing the verities that abide, selling for a pleasure that has in its centre heartache, the pleasures that are forever more.

Now we must find the true middle way between these two extremes, for therein lies the Christian conception of recreation and amusement. The discovery and combination of these two elements will give us the solution of this problem of pleasure.

First, we need a definition of play. Herbert Spencer says, "Play is merely the result of surplus energy." That is absolutely false; it is not true to the facts of play as we see it in lower forms of life. Animals and children do not play because they have surplus energy; they play until they have no energy left. Even in sickness the desire for play has not gone. If Spencer's definition were true, then play would have no place in the life of a Christian, for we have no surplus energy. Play is a fundamental instinct of human nature. To a child playing is living; the value of every hour is reckoned by its opportunity for play. Four-fifths of the waking moments of the first five years of the average child are spent in play; and three-fifths of the second, and two-fifths of the third five years. At fifteen the more strenuous work of life begins, and in healthy, honest, human lives the play time is less, but it is never absent if the life is being lived at its best. Nine of the first fifteen years are spent in play in the case of any healthy child, unless you cram the poor bairn with learning before he is able to take it in. Those nine years have fitted the child for the work of life that lies ahead. The Duke of Wellington said that the battle of Waterloo was not won on the plains of Waterloo, but in the play yard of Eton School; that the boys who won that battle learned how to endure hardship in the play time of their school days. There was a great philosophy of all life in that statement. During the play time of the child, what is going on physically, mentally, socially, morally, that is, if you take an interest in their play and watch it as you ought? The theory of education which came to us from the Renaissance was a wrong theory; it was the theory of impartation. Froebel struck a truer theory when he taught that the theory of education is development, and the kindergarten system is the true theory of education, which sooner or later we must apply the whole way through. The child is to learn reality by playing, and as life goes on the play time becomes the relaxation of the reality, in order that there may be a new taking hold upon the reality. That is the true place of play in human life.

What then is play in essence? Not cessation of activity certainly, nor the doing things that are easy. If you ask your boy to do a certain thing for you, and it is work, he is very tired; but let him go and play, and see how hard he will work in his play. The characteristic of play is the feeling of power in doing things more or less difficult without constraint or compulsion. Play is going back to Eden. It is getting away for the time from the pressure and burden of life, which to a child is the parent's will laid upon it, and to a man is the necessity of the day's work; it is for a little while being free from compulsion and doing that which is delightful and easy, because there is no constraint and no compulsion in it.

I hold, therefore, that play is a paramount instinct in human life, and our business is to, discover its laws. We are denying the Kingship of Christ in a certain realm of life if we are not prepared to see this. Before we denounce the present amusements, we would better hit upon better ones. It is a safer plan and far more satisfactory in its results to switch a locomotive onto another track than to throw it off the line altogether. We have not done our duty when we have denounced without reason or consideration and without a constructive criticism the evil amusements and recreations by which we are surrounded. We should say to our young people everywhere, Here is the true law of the thing that you are seeking; leave the false but find the true. There has been a perpetual tendency to seek a set of rules. We want principles. Have you never found that prohibitions did not work out to the satisfaction of the young people you are trying to govern?

Now let me take a place for a moment as a young man. I have given my heart to Christ, and I ask you this question: Why is it wrong for me to play billiards and yet right for me to play bagatelle? Again, why in scores of Christian homes do I find dominoes, but if you mention dice someone will faint. I am simply stating difficulties that our young people are facing; they want an answer, and you must find the answer. Why is a young man told that he must not play cards, and yet by "cards" you mean those of one particular pattern, and all the other kinds he can play as long as he likes? We must discover some law with regard to the solution of every difficulty that is other than the stating of capricious rules which young men and young women are not prepared to accept and obey. The breaking down of rules makes it necessary to find something else. What shall we do? Endeavor to discover principles.

This question of rule and principle I hold to be of vital importance. The difference between the two is shown in a quotation from the writings of Sir Arthur Helps. He says:

"There are no two words used so confusedly as rule and principle. You can make a rule; you cannot make a principle. You can lay down a rule; you cannot, properly speaking, lay down a principle; it is laid down for you. You can establish a rule; you cannot, properly speaking, establish a principle; you can only declare it. Rules are within your power; principles are not."

That is a most lucid statement of an important difference. You may write rule after rule, and you may make them all, but no young person is going to be bound by them. But you cannot make a principle. A principle is eternal; and the principle is the thing that is important and that conditions all the activities of life.

Now, if there must be room in the life of all our young people for play, what are the great principles that shall govern the play as to its nature, and extent, and time? May I venture to suggest four eternal principles of play. First, play is re-creative; second, play is the partner of work; third, play commands the best conditions possible; fourth, play is social and therefore demands consideration of the well-being of others. There may be other principles, but I have not yet discovered them. But if our young people will take those principles to heart and will only take their recreation within the realm confined within them, then they will apply the law of Christian living to the subject of amusement and they will be saved from everything that is harmful in play.

First, then, play is re-creative. Any form of amusement that destroys is to be avoided. What do I mean when I say destroys? I take into account the twofold fact of the complexity of human nature and its unity. Every human being is composed of spirit, soul and body, but these are contained within the unity of the human being. But I cannot injure any one of these three parts of my complex nature without injuring my whole being, so that I am to refuse as a method of amusement anything that will injure any part of my complex nature. I am not to play at anything which will break down my physical power; I may play at those things that will build it up and make my vision keener and my step more elastic and my physical power greater. There is one of the great realms in which play acts a part in conjunction with God. Half the bad theology in preachers is due to lack of bodily exercise. Many a man instead of getting out into the air and into God's open sunshine is pouring over some book of metaphysics or of theology. There are times when I am doing God's will more by playing golf than by reading my Bible. Exercise which keeps the body and health is right, always providing that it is not of a nature which while building up my body is injuring my mental or spiritual capacity. When you take your brain power off the solid hard work and give it relaxation in the realm of lighter literature, be careful that the literature is not robbing you of spiritual power. You must not re-create anything at the cost of destruction to something else. That is a principle which we must always bear in mind.

Now I go farther. Play is the partner of work. If play recreates, builds up, reenergizes physical and mental power it equips me for better work. You know how again and again after you have given yourself away from work to play for one hour, the next hours of work are filled with fresh life and vigor. I know nothing more helpful to my theological studies than a romp in the nursery with my boys. The play of every man is the partner of his work if it conform to the first principle. Men and women who are giving up their life to play are prostituting their life. That is my quarrel with all professional sport. It is the professional man everywhere that has dragged our sports to the level of betting opportunities, and the sooner we get rid of them the better. Sport and play are to come in as the forces that re-create men for work, and if they become anything else they are wrong.

The third principle is this: Play demands the best conditions possible, therefore, play becomes imperiled if you engage in it in evil company. You cannot hold a comradeship in recreation with the unholy any more than you can in work or in Christian life without suffering at some point of your complex nature. And recreation is not only spoiled by evil company, but it is also spoiled by all impure and unwholesome forms, and play is forever more injured when the zest of play is the hope of gain. I wish I could write that sentence on the hearts of all young men. When a man says that he cannot play a game unless there is something put up on it, do not let him play and do not play with him, for that is not play; that is lust of gain which kills the very inner heart and spirit of sport. Play is being free from all restraints and desires of gain and evil things and even from legitimate toil. Charles Kingsley said that he owed his robust physique to the fact that he was able on occasion to turn his back upon all work and metaphorically to turn somersaults under the blue of heaven without care. If some older men would start doing that they would live longer.

The last principle is this: Play is social. If a man can play by himself give him a room and shut him up. Put a looking glass in and he will be cured. If l am to play I must play with someone, and when I am to play with them I am to remember not only that my personality is to be defended, but that theirs is also. Something which I may be able to play without harm to myself may harm my friend; then I am not to play at it. Take the simplest illustration. I suppose all will admit that chess is a harmless form of play, but I have known a man who could not play chess without an excitement that told upon his mental capacity. It harmed him mentally and spiritually, and his brother, also a man of rare and beautiful Christian life, had to say, "Now, Charlie, we must not play this game together," and the brother saw the force of it. He gave up what was re-creative and rightful for him because it produced an evil effect upon his brother. There is one great principle of play.

Now make an illustrative application of these principles to two forms of recreation and amusement. I cannot speak from an internal knowledge of the theatre, for I have never seen a play in my life, and I do not intend to begin. But, says someone, then you have no right to judge. I am not so sure. I think sometimes that the man who stands outside the apple tree sees the fruit better than the man who is in the middle of it. I notice upon the billboards the placards of my own city, and I know that there are, at any rate, four forms of entertainment offered at a theatre. There are the great dramas like Shakespeare's, of which we are proud, then there is the melodrama, and then the comedy, and the lighter frivolity of the ballet.

First take the ballet. Every principle of pure play is violated by that and I cannot look upon it as a Christian man. Ten or twelve years ago an eminent of the Church of England wrote a magazine article in which he defended the ballet. He was terribly annoyed when the enterprising publisher illustrated his article with pictures of ballet girls, but it was a magnificent commentary upon his philosophy.

I am inclined to say that I have no right to speak of comedy save as it has been possible for me to read the libretto of many of these comedies that are put upon the boards; and my objection to them so far as I have any power of knowing them is, that again and again laughter is raised at the expense of righteousness; the clergyman is held up to ridicule; the man who sneers at the things that my mother held dear is the "funny man." That is the degradation of humor and of comedy. Whether that applies in all comedy I cannot tell, but in a vast number of cases it does, and therefore I cannot take my laughter at a theatre.

Melodrama is, as a rule, utterly and absolutely evil in its effect. The play that is popular today in London is the play that deals with society and its scandals, that laughs at sin, that drags upon the board of the theatre pictures that are called realistic. A playwright in London recently told an English audience that the stage is the mirror of life, and that people go there to see the hatefulness and the evil of sin, and that the playwright's work and the actor's work is to depict the facts of society life, even if they are impure, that the crowd may see them. Why should you depict these things? If the intention of depicting the impurities of life is to save society from them, I tell you that you never yet saved any man by showing him himself. The only way in which a man is saved is by the look that is away from self. That is a simple statement of our evangelical belief, and it is a philosophy of life as well. No man has ever yet been saved from impurity by the display of bestiality upon the stage, so that I cannot take my recreation there.

Now take the last, Shakespeare's plays. I could go to a theatre and see one of those magnificent plays of Shakespeare dramatized without violating my first principle. I could go without it having any evil effect upon my physical, spiritual, or mental life; it would be an education which I should value. I could also see it without violating the second principle; it would not rob me of power to work. I could see it without violating the third principle; I could see it perhaps under the very best conditions of my own life. But I cannot cross the threshold of any theatre I know today without violating the fourth principle; I cannot go without giving countenance to a condition of things in the life of the theatre which is harming other people. I do not mean to say that the theatre harms every man who acts, but the testimony, an awful testimony and yet one that has no denial, is this: that the general influence of the theatrical profession is degrading to those that take it up, that the finest instincts of humanity have very hard work to live in that profession. I am not prepared to say that men and women have not passed unscathed through the awful ordeal, but the instances are so far apart and the wreckage of human hope and human prospects along the line of professional theatrical life is so terrible, that I cannot at present even take what would be to me a most helpful and pleasant recreation in any theatre I know. Therefore, my own conviction is that it is impossible to patronize the theatre today without violating at some point the principles of play that I have laid down for you.

Now take the whole realm of athletic exercises. I hold that it is quite possible that these may be conditioned wholly within these principles, but even that which is in itself innocent becomes evil where any of these principles are violated. I have seen lawn tennis become an actual curse. A young lady who neglects her mental culture and all the filial duty in order to play lawn tennis is going to ruin her whole life with even such a simple thing as lawn tennis. I will not discuss the games that are played at home, only that they should be conditioned within the principles already laid down.

As to mental recreation and reading. I have no sympathy with wholesale denunciations of fiction. I believe that fiction has had its place as a vehicle of truth, and I thank God that ever pen of woman wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin." What then is to be the law of my reading, of my mental recreation? Apply the principles. If you discover that an author has no purpose save that of exciting your imagination, it is a waste of time to read his book. If the author is, under the guise of literary and distinguished ability, attacking the foundations of or condoning sin, not only do not finish the book, but never again read anything he writes. I have in mind one of our English authors, whose career opened with distinguished promise of marvelous and brilliant success. A few years ago he wrote a book in which he endeavored to condone one of the most grievous sins against the family and against the nation. Every previous book of his was swept out of my home, and no other shall ever cross its threshold. I cannot trust a man that will stoop to the sin of pleasing with literary brilliance, while underneath that he hides the poison which robs men of purity. In the same way, a writer who simply excites my mind so that after reading I cannot sleep or settle down to severer work, is a writer to be avoided. But I thank God for the great ministry of pure, strong fiction, for Sir Walter Scott, and Charles Kingsley, and other great writers, that have served their day and generation nobly, and taught truth under the veil of imagination, and have swayed a mighty influence upon men by truth so taught. Longfellow said that many readers judge of the power of a book by the shock it gives their feelings. I beg you to judge of every book that does that, not its power, but its weakness, and avoid it.

Remember, dear Christian soul, that when God converted you He did not take out of your life a single capacity; He did not take out your desire for play at proper intervals, and His will is that you should play. But you have responsibility here as everywhere else. What is it? First, to decide for yourself, Is this right for me and will it harm my brother? I am not now speaking of the matter of eating or drinking, or any of those things that minister to physical necessity, I am speaking entirely of recreation. Then remember when you are deciding that you are to adopt a principle, utterly disregarding the rules which other men desire to impose upon you but jealously regarding the principles of action that your Master teaches you. Do not tell me what I am to do. If you have drawn your rules and had them beautifully and exquisitely framed, in the name of common humanity go and burn them; they are no good to me; I will not have a priest interfere at any point in my life. But I will endeavor to be loyal to my Master in my play and to jealously guard the principles of righteousness and of love, and only to play at that and when and with whom I may do so without harm to my God-given being or to the brother that plays with me. That is to be the perpetual law of play; and having decided, then play. Do not stand shivering on the brink and wondering; play. I would give very little for you if you have no hour in the twenty-four consecrated to relaxation and recreation and play.

Your play will be paralysis or potentiality according to your disobedience or obedience to these principles. Violate the principles and your play will result in paralysis; play in the power of the principles and it will preserve itself as a potentiality in life that will make you stronger as every day goes by. And never forget that as a Christian you play best when you play for the sake of someone else. Find your play somewhere wherein it may minister to the play of another. Do not be selfish even in recreation, but think sometimes of those weary souls that never get the chance, and win an hour for them and play with them. Think of the children that want your help. I do not know any more Christly work for young men than to spend their summer vacation taking into the country and camping out with lads from the slums that will otherwise never see a play day. If you want to have a recreation that is going to be a real blessing to you, think of someone else who will not play unless you give them a chance. There is the very genius of Jesus Christ. And always in those hours that you take away from work for relaxation, remember that he has given you all things richly to enjoy and you may in the name of your Lord and Master, for the strengthening and building up of your nature, play; but be very, very careful, for the realm is an insidious and subtle one, that nothing is to be your play which is also your ruin or the harm of your brother.