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Six Days Thou Shalt Labor, More or Less

Busyness and the Business of Heaven

Karl E. Johnson



If you asked twenty good Christians today how they are doing, nineteen of them would reply, busy. But if you asked almost any of the desert fathers, they would have told you that busyness is a sin. You see what has happened? A vice has become a virtue. The idea of busyness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of obedience, but of striving, as if our activity were more important than God's. Busyness, I would suggest, does not constitute a truly Christian work ethic.

With apologies to C. S. Lewis, whose opening sentences in "The Weight of Glory" I have just adapted for my purposes, busyness is the best place to begin any consideration of leisure these days. Ever since it was predicted that modern machinery would make the twentieth century an age of unprecedented leisure, Americans have been busily searching for explanations for their lack of it.

In his 1970 book *The Harried Leisure Class*, Staffan Linder challenged the notion that time equals money. More money, he said, means more shopping and therefore less time. More recently, Juliet Schor argued in *The Overworked American* that the American workweek has been getting longer since the 1950s—that we are a harried *working class*. In the same post-war period which saw Western Europeans parlay increased productivity into several additional weeks of vacation time, Americans chose to double the amount of goods and services we consume. As someone has said, we seem to have a vacation deficit disorder.

Whether harried from working or from shopping, we buy our homes in the suburbs to "get away from it all," which increases our commute. As a reward for the long hours at work, we build homes that are on average twice as large as those built fifty years ago, only to find they require double the cleaning and yard work. We buy labor-saving appliances and then feel the need to enroll in the local fitness club. The cycle of consumption leaves us rich in things but poor in time.

Even when we play, we often play with the compulsion of a workaholic. We strive to hone our swing, perfect our serve, better our score, or if all else fails, at least buy the latest gear, all the while comparing ourselves to others and suffering anxiety over our performance. Type-A travelers, we frantically consume every vista, only to return from vacation in need of a vacation. In short, the values of the world of work—performance, competition, and self-improvement—increasingly characterize the sphere of leisure. Even for children, pretend pageants, pick-up games, and swamp explorations have fallen victim to a regimen of music lessons, sports leagues, and science fairs.

I for one am dissatisfied with most accounts of our busyness. Linder and Schor are right that we are working and shopping more, but *why* are we working and shopping more? I have come to believe that the reason is simple, if also unsettling. We busy ourselves because we need to be busy.

Some years ago I ran an outdoor adventure program for "at-risk" youth. The most challenging part of the camping trips for these kids was not living outdoors, but living without Walkmans. Rock climbing and whitewater paddling they took in stride, but lying under the stars, accompanied only by the sounds made by wind in the trees and an occasional loon, was way out of their comfort zone. Accustomed to filling every moment of their lives with distraction, they were terrified by its absence.

The specter of not having anything to do, of time moving slowly, is threatening. Our play, along with our work, clutters our lives so that we don't have to listen to the silence—or whatever else might be out there. Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of television is not its trivial content, but the way it drives quiet and stillness from our homes.

"Six days shalt thou labor," says the commandment, and, as a species that specializes in missing the mark, it is no wonder that most of us work either five or seven. Human beings make idols out of whatever is at hand, and both work and leisure have proven themselves good raw material.

But hedonism and workaholism are not two ends of a spectrum between which extremes we should be groping for a balance point, as if our goal were to seek moderation in all things, including sin. The issue is not just *how much* we work and play (though that matters), but *how* we work and play—the character of our habits and the attitudes and motivations behind them. Just as it is possible, conspicuous-consumer style, to be simultaneously a hedonist and a workaholic, it is also possible to be neither.

Let's start with work, and on this subject the Bible offers no real refuge for slackers. God worked in creation and made Adam a gardener. Jesus worked, Paul worked—sometimes "night and day"—and so too, more than one biblical writer emphasizes, must we. The Reformers developed this insight into their doctrine of vocation, ennobling ordinary labor by viewing it as glorifying to God. Our labor—sometimes is laborious, but work itself is a creation ordinance, not a function of the fall.

That said, workaholics who think they are earning treasure in heaven should be reminded that the instruction to work six days is an elaboration of the commandment to keep the Sabbath—that is, to work *only* six days. The Sabbath places a boundary around our acquisitive nature and our inclination to lose ourselves in our work. The much-ballyhooed Protestant work ethic, which has been invoked to justify many an unbalanced life, never advocated work without end.

Modern adherents of what is really a secularized work ethic may pride themselves on being “self-made” successes who “work hard” (that is, long hours), find “fulfillment” at work, and have “competitive” salaries to demonstrate God’s blessing. But the early Protestants understood that work is a service to God and others, that moderation in work is a virtue, that success is only by the grace of God, and that wealth entails temptation to sin. This is Leland Ryken’s argument in *Redeeming the Time*, where he concludes, “What goes by the name of ‘the Protestant ethic’ today is nearly the opposite of what the original Protestants actually advocated and practiced.”

The phrase *working hard* smacks of virtue—implying we’d rather not be doing what we do. But work is often quite seductive. When expectations are clear and we know what behaviors are rewarded, focusing on a task provides a pleasurable “mental narrowing” that is not unlike—you guessed it—playing a game. In other words, work has its own addictive pleasures.

Workaholicism then is not so much a quantity of work as a quality of work. It is the belief that God needs us and can’t get along very well without us. It is finding our fulfillment and identity in ourselves rather than in God. The addiction to work is a form of pride that makes one’s work less, not more, glorifying to God.

But what about leisure? Telling a roomful of Christians that I study leisure is risky business. Is not the very fact that leisure has become a subject of study a sure sign of a decadent society? When does the Bible ever say anything about leisure, anyway? Idle hands do the devil’s work, and so forth.

It’s undoubtedly true that leisure is the occasion for all sorts of immorality and idolatry, but this only means that leisure is very much like work, not very different from work. I prefer to begin with the assumption that leisure, like work, is created good, if only for the simple reason that an omnipotent God could have created us without the need to sleep, but didn’t.

The essence of leisure is surely freedom, as illustrated by its derivation from the Latin *licere* (from which we also get *liberty* and *license*). Leisure is commonly understood as free time, or freedom from work or obligation. But this is not quite right—as my kids demonstrated out in the wilderness, one can have leisure yet be most un-leisurely. Most philosophers and theologians of leisure prefer to define it as being free from anxiety. This means that leisure is not exactly the polar opposite of work. The dance teacher who enjoys her vocation has leisure-in-work, while the student who pirouettes only to please her parents has work-in-leisure. The philosopher Josef Pieper suggests that idleness, on the other hand, involves an anxious or troubled state of mind. Leisure, understood as contentment, is the very opposite of idleness.

Our Christian texts and tradition are far from silent about leisure. Genesis describes God creating and then resting. The classical Christian answer to the question, Why is there something rather than nothing? is that existence itself is gratuitous—a good gift of grace—rather than necessary. God created freely, and for his pleasure. Why then did he rest? Was he tired? Did he want to watch a football game or have to go to church? Surely God rested for the same reason he created, because it was good—intrinsically good, not just “good for something.” The seventh day was the first full day of human existence. Adam and Eve didn’t have to work for the weekend. Their lives began with rest.

What Genesis describes, Exodus prescribes. For the Israelites, the Sabbath established what might be called an ecology of time, where work and rest fit together as an organic whole. Christian observance of the Lord’s Day retains this ecology. Celebratory feasts are sprinkled throughout the Old and New Testaments. Jesus feasted, changed water to wine, and even earned the title of glutton and drunkard. Paul takes pains to explain that we are justified by faith and not “by our works”—which makes Protestant paranoia about leisure rather ironic. The very last chapter of Revelation promises a reversal of the curse of Genesis, including the pain that is a part of our toil.

Creation itself suggests that God values beauty, enjoyment, play, and pleasure. Are not the birds, as Baudelaire said, singing more than Darwin allows? Creation abounds with beauty that goes beyond necessity. It seems that God didn’t skimp, pull punches, or even watch the budget. His work is not utilitarian.

We are not busy because of demanding jobs and conspicuous consumption. We are busy because we do not live our theology—or, one could say, we live our true theology all too well. We know about creation, about the Sabbath, and about justification by faith, but these doctrines somehow fail to find their expression in practice. The question for those who want to put the Christian vision into practice is: How then shall we rest?

Here again we can borrow from Lewis, from his words in “Learning in War-Time,” on the life of a scholar. (It’s worth remembering that *scholar* and *school* come from *schole*, the Greek word for leisure.) For a scholar to live life to the glory of God, Lewis writes, does not mean

any attempt to make our intellectual inquiries work out to edifying conclusions. That would be, as Bacon says, to offer to the author of truth an unclean sacrifice of a lie. I mean the pursuit of knowledge and beauty, in a sense, for their own sake, but in a sense which does not exclude their being for God’s sake. An appetite for these things exists in the human mind, and God makes no appetite in vain. We can therefore pursue knowledge as such, and beauty, as such, in the sure confidence that by so doing we are either advancing to the vision of God ourselves or indirectly helping others to do so. Humility, no less than the appetite, encourages us to concentrate simply on the knowledge or the beauty, not too much concerning ourselves with their ultimate relevance to the vision of God.

Lewis's words apply quite directly to any kind of leisure. God gives us the freedom to focus on the immediate goal—licking the riff, making the putt, or spicing the goulash—without the constant burden of self-consciously attending to the grand goals of building our character or glorifying God. Those goals can—and will—be a natural byproduct. As Eric Liddell said to his pious sister in the film *Chariots of Fire*, "When I run, I feel his pleasure."

This is no "apology for idlers." To the contrary, our leisure pursuits require both ethical and aesthetic judgments. But Christians often settle for pretty much anything that is not unethical, rather than aspiring for that which is truly beautiful. The real test of any leisure activity is whether it yields satisfactions that truly satisfy. It is no coincidence that truly rewarding leisure activities draw attention away from the self, giving the lie to the notion that leisure is somehow inherently selfish. Nor is it a coincidence that leisure activities associated with immorality, like gambling or "recreational" drugs, consistently fail to yield enduring pleasures. True leisure interrupts rather than stimulates our appetites for fame, fortune, or power.

So, should we aspire to a life of leisure? No, or at least, not yet. To quote Lewis once again, work necessarily characterizes life in this world, but only because this world is "upside down":

Dance and game are frivolous, unimportant down here; for "down here" is not their natural place. Here, they are a moment's rest from the life we were placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down. That which, if it could be prolonged here, would be a truancy, is likest that which in a better country is the End of ends. Joy is the serious business of Heaven.

The truth is that the Christian way is not so much the way of work *or* leisure, nor even the way of work *and* leisure. It is the way of trust and contentment. There is work to be done, and there always will be. Work is the dominant chord of life this side of heaven, and we shouldn't try to pretend otherwise. But as Gilbert Meilaender has said, the things we enjoy "are channels through which the divine glory strikes us, and those who love and delight in any good thing may yet learn to love God." If that's so—if earthly pleasures are foretastes of the world to come—then we will always be in more danger from our work than from our leisure. ■