

Pray... *Any comments or questions of rest and work before we get to the fun stuff?* Play is an important part of human development. Children play and learn and the two are essentially one activity. I'm amazed at watching my grandchildren learn to talk, to use their bodies, and to learn concepts through play. They watch us, they learn from us, and that's a little scary! My grandson, Elion, loves to push buttons and often when he comes over he asks for our old, and I mean old, cell phones so he can "play" with them. He makes calls, pretends to talk to the neighbor, and does all kinds of stuff with an old cell phone. Why is that so fascinating? Probably because he sees his mom and dad on theirs.

When we become adults, however, it becomes a little different. Play is what we do for fun; work is what we do for a living. Play is what we do, if we have time, on the weekend; work is what we do during the week.

For some people their work is like that of a child – playtime! People who have discovered what they were made to do, and can make a living doing it, often feel like their work is play. They are extremely blessed! For others, play is wholly distinct from work.

My husband, Dan, finds rest in adventure. His famous line, "*I need some adventure*" at one time led us to California where we hiked Half Dome. I had never heard of Half Dome before, and we undertook hiking it in ignorance. **(Slide)** This is a photo of the final ascent, and you can see that it was a bit intense. And we hit that after six hours of hiking. I remember coming down the mountain, on wobbly legs, and saying, "Ok Mr. Adventure, are you happy now?!?" But in a way that experience was playful and even restful.

We all need to play, and based on the way children learn, through play, I think we were created to play. So, what does the Bible say about play?

If you google "play and the Bible," you will find very little to answer that question (at least on the first couple pages of results). The first response was one blog post, written in 2007 by a retired science professor, that frankly didn't say much, and following that was a Biblehub source with Zechariah 8:5, which says, "*The streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.*"

After those responses, the next were *What does the Bible say about playing the lottery* and *Where does the Bible say that you are not to play instruments*. You get the idea. When I first started working on play, I thought, "*Well, this might be a short segment of the retreat!*"

(**Slide**) Left to my own devices, I found evidence for play in general revelation, creation, and in special revelation, Scripture. We'll take a look at that just as soon as we figure out what play is.

I used to enjoy playing board games, card games, tennis, golf and softball. (I met my husband the year he was my softball coach.) We also played darts and ping pong and backgammon. When my kids were young, we played candy land, chutes and ladders, monopoly and regularly went outside to play with the dog or to toss the ball around. It was enjoyable. I had fun. That was a while ago...

Play is a topic that needs to be discussed, and I am most in need of it! Given my lack of success looking for information on the Bible and play, I spent the better part of a morning looking online for information about adults and play. Interestingly I found a fair number of articles and TED talks by psychologists and MDs who advocate the benefits of play for people of all ages. None of them, however, was from an explicitly Christian perspective.

I find it ironic that psychologists and doctors are researching the benefits of play and the church isn't saying much. God created us, he made us with a sense of humor and with the desire to play, so why aren't we playing more?

My search was nowhere near exhaustive, but it makes me wonder if Christians tend to be a little too *serious*. We're all trying to be such good Christians that I wonder if we've lost some of the absolute pleasure, fun, of living in God's amazing world under his constant care. I also wonder if a lack of rest results in a loss of play. Who can play when their stressed out?

We humans are created in the image of God. We have a desire to create, to work, to rest, and I believe we also have an innate desire to play. Several of the articles I read define play as activity done for the pure enjoyment of the activity, not learning, not developing skill, not earning income. Just fun.

Think of a church picnic. The church picnics I remember all featured games: softball, egg tosses, water balloons, face painting...whatever. They were *fun*. God's people having a good time together.

Stuart Brown, a doctor who has done quite a bit of research on play and who I found when I watched a TED talk by him, says he didn't even like to give a definition of play, because it's so varied. But, one time when he was speaking to a group of engineers who would need something like a definition, he came up with the following list: (**Slide**) Play is...apparently purposeless (done for its own sake), voluntary, inherent attraction, freedom from time, diminished consciousness of self, improvisational potential, and continuation desire. (*Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, by Stuart Brown, p. 17)

Or maybe this definition is easier: (**Slide**) "...we all have things we do for the *pure love of the activity*, regardless of whether they ever provide an income. Psychologists call this activity 'play.'" Jeff Goins, *The Art of Work*, p. 141.

What do you do just for the fun of it? Just shout it out...

Let's define play as any activity that we do for the sheer love of doing it. No agenda. No income potential. No reward other than the delight of playing.

Because there was not much text in the Bible specifically relating to play, I looked at the two ways that God has revealed himself to us: God's general revelation, *creation*, and God's special revelation, *Scripture*.

Creation

One day I was watching my then 21-month old grandson, Elion, playing, and he was so content, so absorbed, so completely focused on driving a toy train around the track. He can still get absolutely absorbed in playing with anything on wheels. **(Picture)** It was a pleasure to watch. It made me think of Jesus when he said, "*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.*" (Matthew 19:14) Mark adds the verse, "*I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*" (Mark 10:15)

God created children to explore their environments through play. Why wouldn't he want us to continue to do that? If we're honest, we all must come to Jesus like a child, like a preschooler who can't do anything for herself other than love her caregivers and learn about the world as she plays.

What is the point of a sunset, of a symphony, or of dancing? Yes, you could say a sunset points to the glory of God, a symphony takes skill to compose and to play, and to dance well takes coordination and practice. But we all enjoy a beautiful sunset, it can be fun to play music even if you're not a skilled musician or to dance even when you're not terribly coordinated. In fact, it's probably more fun when amateurs do it than when professionals play music or dance.

Dan and I went to California for our wedding anniversary with another couple, and we went out for dinner one night and had a booth perfectly placed to appreciate the sunset. **(Slide)** It was the most magnificent sunset I have ever experienced; it seemed like it lasted for hours. People kept going outside to take pictures. We did too; it was glorious.

Why does God do that? Why did he create a world that would routinely delight people with fantastic sunsets, beautiful sunrises, and stunning scenery? Why did he make giraffes necks so long? Why did he create such a great variety of beautiful butterflies? What is the purpose of a peacock's plume if not beauty? And what is with all those strange animals: **(Slide)** anteaters, platypuses, and warthogs to name just a few. Why did God give people a sense of humor? Why do we laugh?

God must have had a fantastic time creating the world! I picture him smiling, even laughing, at the wonders of his creation. Think of how you enjoy

creating. I enjoy creating a nice dinner, a comfortable home, a fantastic vacation; I also enjoy writing and speaking; taking a large or difficult concept and attempting to get my head around it and then to make it readable and/or understandable. My sister and brothers are all visual artists (somehow I missed that particular family trait!), and they all love to create artwork as a hobby.

I believe everything God created expresses a piece of who he is; he's glorious, as in a sunset, powerful, as in the ocean, creative, as in butterflies and peacocks, and he has a sense of humor, as never better expressed than by children.

One night, when Christine and her family were over for dinner, *almost* 6-year-old Oliver played for 45 minutes with a salad spinner. Yep, he entertained himself and he promised to do "amazing things" with the salad spinner. *Who thinks of that?* A salad spinner and a five-year-old boy – that's all we needed for some play.

Any other examples...?

Scripture

Ask for biblical references to or examples of "play" or stories that may have had a playful tone...

Sun standing still? (Josh. 10); Jesus with Mary and Martha? (Luke 10:38-42) He must have stayed there often – did they play games, have feasts?; Zeph. 3:17; The Wedding at Cana (John 2); Isaiah 25 – rich food and aged wine for a feast; Every perfect gift is from above (James 1:17); New Heaven and New Earth in Revelation...

One of my favorite verses is in the book of Nehemiah, which tells us of the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem after the exile. At one point, the people assembled "as one man" in the square, and they asked Ezra, the priest and the scribe, to read the law of Moses to them while they stood in front of him from sun up until noon. (Read Nehemiah 8:2-3)

What do you think the people were thinking? Did they even know the law? Had it been lost or forgotten? I have a dozen or so Bibles at home along with dictionaries, commentaries, and books of all kinds to help me to remember and better understand God's word. Back in 430BC, the average home may not have had one written word.

They were listening to the Word of God. For hours. And they wept.

But Nehemiah said something amazing. He said, "*This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep. For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'*"

Nehemiah 8:9-10

(Slide) The *joy* of the Lord is your strength. He didn't say that the duty of the Lord is your strength. How about the diligence of the Lord is your strength? Nope. Neither did he say that serious self-examination and correction is your strength.

Weeping over broken laws and human failure was rejected. Nehemiah told them to have a party, to have fun, to rejoice; *to play*.

What is your reaction when you read or hear God's word? Self-incrimination or Joy? Are you inclined to weep or have a party? There is a time for thoughtful, self-examination, no question, but the people in Nehemiah's day had just heard the Law read and made clear to them. There were 13 Levites roaming through the audience to clarify what Ezra was reading, to make sure that the people understood the word of God. They understood.

"Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." (Neh. 8:12) While they were eating and drinking, they were not working, they were not resting as in a Sabbath, they were *playing*. *They were enjoying the moment that God had instructed them to enjoy.*

God and his Word to us are a source of *joy*. When we truly understand what God is saying to us, perhaps a better response than weeping would be joy that we now understand his word and that we have time to apply it to our lives.

Maybe it's because I like parties, but that verse has always been one of my favorites. When my Christine got married in 2009, that verse was *literally* my source of strength for several weeks. Most of you know Joaquim – I can't believe that they've been married for eight years! - Joaquim arrived about two weeks before the wedding with his fiancé visa. (Did you know there was such a thing? I didn't.) His family arrived about a week later, and several of Christine's friends from school arrived toward the end of the week of the wedding.

The week before the wedding was an absolutely crazy week. I never knew, from one day to the next, who or how many people we would have for dinner and who or how many people would be sleeping at our house that night. I did lots of grocery shopping; lots of sheet washing and bed changing; lots of rehearsal dinner and wedding prep. Since Joaquim's family had no idea of US wedding customs and they were just arriving from Brazil, we had the rehearsal dinner at our house featuring the main dish of Lou Malnoti's pizza, and we invited everyone who was in from out of town, Dan's three brothers and their families, and my three siblings and families, to come. Why not?

So, we had random house guests and dinner guests and, I don't know, 50 or 60 people or so for dinner on Saturday night followed by the wedding on Sunday. It was truly nuts.

I remember waking up every morning that week, and before I got out of bed I would pray to the Lord: “Lord, help me to be a gracious hostess and to get done everything I need to get done.’ And then I would conclude with a rousing: *The joy of the Lord is my strength!*” That was about all I had time for, and I would hit the ground running!

My memory of that week is that it was *fun*. It was some work, but it was also a lot of playing. It was a wedding celebration, and I honestly enjoyed having so many people around and providing hospitality for everyone and anyone.

Sometimes all we’ll have time for is: *The joy of the Lord is my strength!*
Go!

Last weekend we were at the wedding of our niece, and as I talked with my sister she said that, yes, it was a lot of work, but it had all been done with joy and out of love, and the wedding itself was such an overwhelming expression of love, that it didn’t feel like work. It was so satisfying – it felt more like play.

The joy of the Lord is your strength! That little verse always picks me up. I hope it will do the same for you. I believe that God enjoys it when we enjoy his creation, when we create in it, when we enjoy doing things with each other just for the pure joy of doing them. That’s play, and I think God’s all for it.

Stuart Brown says that the “opposite of play is not work – the opposite of play is depression.” *Play*, p. 126. Brown approaches play from a totally secular viewpoint, at least as best I can tell, but what he says about play makes sense. “It can bring back excitement and newness to the job...Most important, true play that comes from our own inner needs and desires and is the only path to finding lasting joy and satisfaction in our work. In the long run, work does not work without play.” P. 127

(Slide) Actually, this list of characteristics of play sounds a lot like characteristics of a Christian who is living close to her Savior. Voluntary, inherent attraction, freedom from time, and a diminished sense of self, and a desire to improvise and continue are all qualities that sound very “kingdom of God like.” (The only one that doesn’t obviously fit is apparently purposeless – maybe we need to put emphasis on *apparently*.)

(Slide) “**We enjoy freedom when we anticipate by playing what can and shall be different and when in the process we break the bonds of the immutable status quo**...the significance of games is identical with that of the arts, namely to construct ‘anti-environments’ and ‘counter-environments’ to ordinary and everyday human environments and the conscious confrontation of these to open up creative freedom and future alternatives. We are no longer playing, merely with the past in order to escape it for a while, but we are increasingly playing with the future in order to know it.” Jurgen Moltmann – Theologian in *Theology of Play* 1972, p 16-17 Quoted in *Sabbath* by Dan Allender on p. 85

I wonder if the “anti-environments” and “counter-environments” is part of the reason why Christians haven’t taught too much about play. When I first did this retreat, I gave this talk on play on Saturday night, and then we all played a game. The retreat was at the Lake Lawn Lodge in Lake Geneva, and the game was to follow clues and be the first team to be back having taken a photo of all the right places from the clues.

It got kind of intense. The normal “rules” for Christian behavior at a women’s retreat had been let go; we were in “play” mode; we were creating a bit of a counter-environment through this game. People brought out their competitive sides, and a little bit of their truer personalities were revealed.

I found the whole thing fascinating. There were a couple people who were not happy about the way it ended, but actually this gave us all a perfect opportunity to put Christianity into practice. Were we all rested in Christ? Did we realize that winning or losing had *nothing* to do with our identity or our worth or anything that really mattered? Were we playing to have fun, or did a few of the women put far more emphasis on the results than others?

The group handled it very well, but that taught me that playing can take us in to uncharted territory with other people. As Christians, however, we should be able to handle that. As Christians, maybe we should put ourselves in that situation more often so that we can demonstrate before the world how to be appropriately competitive. As Christians, we have an opportunity to show the culture how to disagree while listening, with understanding, with loving, and by agreeing that there are things that are more important and more central to our being than the disagreement. Christians live on another plane, our true identity as children of God, on which to identify with other people. Maybe playing helps us to see that.

Don’t you think God wants us to have an abundant life just like we want our children and grandchildren to grow, laugh, learn, and get everything out of life that they can? That will mean some disappointment, some losing, and it will mean some success, some winning. Playing helps us learn that both are important.

(Slide) “When we play, we nudge the border of forever. Its joy is precisely this: it rehearses heaven.” *The Rest of God* by Mark Buchanan, P. 141

When we rest in all that Jesus Christ has done for us we are living in the Kingdom of God. We are rehearsing heaven. When we work for and with God, we are rehearsing heaven. And even when we play, as Mark Buchanan says, we “nudge the border of forever.” It rehearses heaven.

Rest, work and play seem like boring, basic, blasé, elements of life, but in Jesus Christ even the most mundane elements of living, sleep, rest, work, and play can be done out of worship and service to the One to whom we owe everything and they become delightful, exciting, and interesting.

Will you seek Jesus in your rest? Will you work for and with God and watch for what he has created for you to do? And will you play with joy and love and abandon? Will you rehearse heaven?