

PLAYING AT RELIGION

"And the Lord said, Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept." Luke 7:31-32

Out of His perfect knowledge of human nature in general and of these Pharisees in particular comes this sharp-edged criticism of the shallow unbelief of the men of His day. The criticism flashes with all the keenness of a burnished blade. It is as penetrating as it is picturesque. The burden of its complaint is that the men who rejected Him stood convicted of inconsistency and insincerity.

Christ found in childhood a realm of loveliness and enchantment. He was fond of children; they were fond of Him. He made a hero out of the child. He declared, "Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Nor can we ever forget the scene in which He administered rebuke to His ambitious and quarrelsome disciples by setting a child in their midst and quietly announcing, "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Matt. 18:4. Open, eager, unpretentious and trustful--that was the childlikeness which the Master extolled. We might call this the idealistic use of childhood for purposes of illustration.

In our text we have a realistic view of children, particularly spoiled children, in which Christ shows up the folly and failure of the Pharisees. He accuses these Pharisees of being like children. This accusation is a bit surprising. They are rather like children that are peevish and fretful, quarrelsome and cranky. They are indignant at the Master's action.

Wherein are these cultured and scholarly Pharisees childish? To answer this question Christ shows us a group of boys and girls assembled for play. If a child does not care to play, there is something wrong. Play is as natural for a child as breathing. All normal children delight in playing. It is also a means of physical, mental and moral development. But, strange to say, these children are not playing. They are glaring angrily at each other and quarreling. The leaders are engaged in a game of "let's pretend" or "play like!" but the rest refuse to play. The leaders walk around with their fingers upon imaginary lutes. They pipe in merriment to their companions, and imitate the procession of a marriage feast, but the sullen faces do not relax. They will not dance. In a moment the game is changed. The piping has stopped and the wailing is heard. The voices throb with imitation sorrow, but still the children will not play. They will not respond either to the merriment or the grief. What the children did in their play, the wise men standing there did in their prejudice. The children would not play wedding because it was too glad, and they would not play funeral because it was too sad. Then Christ said, "And you Pharisees are like that."

Christ reminded them that not many months ago a prophet of amazing power had appeared among them. He called all men to repentance. He spoke against sin with scathing severity and deep conviction. He did not spare any wrong-doer. His message was one of reproof and rebuke in a high degree. He did not go to Jerusalem to preach, but continued in the wilderness. He so preached that he fairly emptied the cities and filled the wilderness with the throngs that came to hear him. When you went out there to hear him, he flayed you for your hypocrisy and pride. At last he was invited to preach at the court of Herod. There he was just as unsparing in his denunciation of sin as he had been in the wilderness. As a fearless evangelist he demanded a thorough going clean-up of the moral corruption around the palace. And none of you liked it. You said, "It's too much like a funeral."

You turned John the Baptist down with the contemptuous charge that he was possessed of a devil. His habits of life, his style of preaching, his lack of association with the

people, etc., led them to criticize him severely. He was not a good handshaker. He was not much given to pastoral visiting. They said he was too hard and harsh, that he was entirely too austere. They said they liked a message full of sweetness and light, and that he did not have any of it. They liked a preacher who was a good mixer, and nobody could get close to John the Baptist.

Following John the Baptist was another Preacher Who was quite different. He was sociable, friendly, and easy to approach. He called men to repentance, but He did it in a way that was as winsome as the sunrise and as sweet as the perfume of flowers. He declared that He had come that men might have life and have it in abundance. He offered a new freedom, a new power and a new joy. He lived among men. He was elbowed by the crowds. He went into homes where He was made welcome and where the atmosphere was sweet with the breath of love. He went into others where He was insulted and where the atmosphere was tense with suspicion and hate. But never once, so far as we know, did He refuse an invitation. So, the Pharisees did not like Him either. They said He was too affable with all classes of people. They called Him a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. It was this inconsistency in them that drew forth from Christ the words of our text.

In effect, Christ says, "You are like peevish and unreasonable children. It is expected that six-year-olds would prefer a world of make-believe to one of reality, but when the practice is carried over into adult life, it becomes a thing 'too pathetic to be a joke'. You have substituted for the simplicity and openness of childlikeness at its best the fickleness, selfishness and stubbornness of childishness at its worst. You are simply playing at religion--and making a bad job of it." Indeed, professing Christians today need to be stabbed by the truth into a realization of how easy it is just to play at religion.

We still have such children, and plenty of them, in the churches. They have been petted and pampered until no kind of preaching suits them. If the wrath of God is proclaimed, the preacher is too severe; if love is preached, the minister is too sentimental.

Our Lord spoke of His generation as children playing in the markets. First they piped; they played wedding. They then mourned; they played funeral. First they rejoiced, and then they wept. It looked real enough, but it was only make-believe. They did not mean it; they were only children playing in the marketplace.

In general today the human race is only playing at living. A hurried, feverish generation gulps down its breakfast, bolts to the shop or office, races home through crazy traffic, reads the comic sheets, tunes in on a television star, takes an aspirin tablet or something stronger, and calls it a day. A superficial multitude dabbles in a thousand things, tries to talk learnedly of many matters, but only exposes a pitiful ignorance of all. Compare the poetry of today with the bards of old, modern music with the old masters, modern politicians who only run for things with the former statesmen who stood for things, and you behold a Punch-and-Judy show. For we are only children playing in the marketplace, just pretending to live, acting parts in a comedy that turns out to be a tragedy, just trying to pose our way through a dramatized version of ourselves.

When we turn to the churches, we discover, even as our Lord found it among the Pharisees, multitudes just playing at religion. First, they are children; rather than childlike as the Master would have them be, they are childish. There are babes who ought to be brown. There are milk-feeders who should have reached a meat-diet long ago. Our Lord is here suggesting the need of development. Children love self-expression better than self-discipline. The psychologists say they are "egocentric", meaning that their world revolves around themselves. If they remain that way, it will be too bad for them and too bad for society. The resulting clash will ultimately break them, and certainly it will damage society.

Why do people behave like little children? What lies back of this childishness that keeps us from playing the game?

1. Maybe we are too tired.
When children are dead tired they are not in any condition to play. They ought to rest or to go to sleep. If they do not do so, they will become fretful and peevish. Our nerves are frayed. We are a bit like Elijah under the juniper tree, tired in body and without that rest of soul that is born of a living faith.
2. Maybe we are hungry.
Often a child had rather play than to eat, but this is not the case for long. Soon hunger will assert itself. And I am wondering how much of the fretfulness of the present day is the result of sheer hunger. There are some who are hungering for physical bread, but there are far more who are hungering for the bread of life. Such are restless and peevish, fretful and dissatisfied.
3. Maybe we are just spoiled.
Therefore the game we suggest must be played, and played our way, or we will not play at all. The moment our wills are crossed or our pet views are disregarded, we refuse to play. It takes real courage, forbearance and love to work patiently with folks of varying temperaments and never give up.
4. Maybe we are victims of arrested development.
Some of us are childish because we have never grown up. Now a child is a lovely something, but if it fails to grow it becomes a disappointment and a heartache. Or if it grows physically and fails to grow intellectually and spiritually, the result is even more tragic. And how often the heart of God is broken by His children who never grow up.

The only cure for childishness is childlikeness. Where, then, do we stand? Are we child-like or just childish? Are we heroically playing the game, or merely criticizing those who are playing? Are we doing wise deeds in cooperation with others, or only making wise cracks about somebody else? Are we cheerfully lifting our share of the load, or adding to the already overburdened shoulders of others? Are we entering into God's purpose for our lives, or thwarting that purpose? Are we playing the man, or playing the baby? Were our Lord to speak His mind about us, would He say, "You are like unto children sitting in the market place, and calling one to another, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept"? or would He call us good and faithful servants? None can answer this question but ourselves.

Many childish Christians today are playing at religion because they live in the market-place; they are perfectly at home in this world. They live to buy and sell, to get and to gain; their minds are taken up with profit and loss, laying up treasure on earth and not in heaven. Where their treasure is their heart is also. The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word, and they become unfruitful. As it was in the days of Noah, and of Lot, so it is today. Millions who name the name of Christ are more at home in the market-place than at the house of God, more satisfied in the shop than in the sanctuary. No wonder they only play at religion. "They say they are rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing and know not that they are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked."

In the days of our Saviour's sojourn here, the market-place was not only a place of buying and selling, but it was also the public square where the people met to gossip and hear the news and pass the time away. Here again the make-believe Christians of this present age have assembled. Call it by any modern name, there you will find make-believe Christians wasting instead of redeeming the time, frittering away the precious hours. Is it any wonder that such poor souls sit listlessly at church on Sunday morning, having ears but hearing not, having eyes but seeing not, having hearts but feeling not? For their minds are still out in the market-place where this generation chatters away in a strife of tongues about the newest styles and the latest pictures and the freshest scandal.

So these childish Christians play at religion. They join the church; they go to church; some of them work in the church, but they are only playing; it is not their life.

Just as these children of our Lord's time piped and mourned, played wedding and funeral, so these make-believe Christians pretend first to rejoice and then to weep. They sing with gusto:

"Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Saviour am happy and blest.
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Saviour all the day long."

But they are neither submissive, happy, nor at rest, and as far as praising the Saviour all the day long is concerned, when they ever do that?

They turn around with equal ease to play funeral and to mourn. Their eyes well with tears at a sad story; they shake their heads soberly when the seriousness of the times is pictured, but it is only a pantomime; they go on living as they have always lived, pitying the victim by the wayside, but, like the Levite, passing by on the other side.

There is no sin that is more common, more deceptive, or more disastrous than the iniquity of pious make-believe. Indeed one can become so proficient at pretending that he can deceive himself.

David Hume went to hear a very poor, plain preacher, and when asked why he attended such preaching, since he as a skeptic did not believe it, he answered, "I don't believe what he says, but he believes it, and once in a while I like to hear a man who believes what he says!" God awaken us today to the sin of pious unreality! The awfulness of sin--we have dressed that nowadays in language of psychology; we have healed slightly our hurt and spread cold cream on cancer and blamed our evils on ancestors and environment. We are told that sin is inhibited pleasure, arrested or incomplete development, biological growing-pains. We no longer weep for our transgressions, because sin, as men now see it, is no longer anything to cry about. It is a plaything of the market-place.

The joy of salvation, the good cheer of sins forgiven--is it real, or did you join church on some decision day with no sense of guilt removed, no experience of pardoning mercy? Is the joy of the Lord your strength or do you merely pipe in the market-place?

No wonder the early Christians shock the world. They did not play at religion; they took the will of Christ seriously. They endured hardness as good soldiers and did not entangle themselves with the affairs of this world.

We are not actors to imitate our Lord. The actor can impersonate his subject, but he can never exchange his personality for the character he portrays. God grant that you may not be childish, but childlike, and that Christ may truly live in you.