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Serious or Playful: A Meditation by Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978)



translated by John Kok

Life is full of contrasts. One such contrast is that of joy and sorrow, another that of being playful or serious. These two contrasts are different from each other in a variety of ways. One such difference is that joy and sorrow come over or overwhelm us. Joy overtakes us when we once again meet a long-lost-sight-of relative. And sorrow overcomes us upon hearing of the death of a dear friend. Joy and sorrow happen to us. When we are playful or serious, something else is going on. There we contribute to

The first rendering of this somewhat enigmatic “meditation,” by Dr. Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978), was printed under the title “*Spel of ernst?*” in the *Gereformeerde Kerkbode* (11, 18, 25 November and 2 December 1923). A slightly revised rendition, translated here from the Dutch by Dr. John H. Kok (Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Dordt College), was published in *Stuwdam* (16 January 1937) under the title “Groote kinderen.”

the action, owing to our attitude about things. This is not to say that joy or sorrow and being playful or serious cannot occur at the same time. Their combination is possible precisely because they are not the same. And examples abound. Glee fills children (and others too) when they are playing games; and sorrow often makes one somber.

But there are other connections, for example the one we find in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 11, when Jesus says to the crowd around him, “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn’” (16-17). His reference here is to playing and being serious, but in connection with something entirely different. Jesus is talking about having an eye for one’s own times and for the seriousness of the situation. He is encouraging people to be earnest regarding what is happening in their days, which is certainly not to say that it was only a matter for mourning and sorrow. According to Christ, taking one’s times seriously holds certainly for sorrow but also for joy.

I would like to develop this thought by taking a closer look at the first nineteen verses of Matthew chapter 11. The focus there is not simply on the relationship between Jesus and the crowd; Jesus is also talking to the crowd about themselves. His words have to do with the relationship of the crowd to John the Baptist and to Jesus and are preceded by a discussion, at a distance, between John and Jesus themselves. We need to have a sense of that

discussion in order to understand what follows.

John the Baptist did an outstanding job of announcing Christ's coming, all the while effacing himself as the herald of the one who would be coming. He did not believe, as did the Pharisees, that a kingdom was coming that would be wonderful only for the Jews. He knew what the kingdom was about; he knew that the long-expected one would be the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. The significance of the Messiah-King of Israel would be worldwide—not in the sense of a powerful regime, but in the sense that he would have an answer to life's most persistent questions, that he would resolve the problem of sin, that he even had a solution for the problem of sin.

John took his task so seriously that he went out of his way to rebuke Herod the tetrarch for an impermissible, inexcusable relationship with the wife of Herod's brother. Herod, in turn, arbitrarily locked John in prison for an undefined length of time.

Exasperated, this final prophet in Israel watched and waited every day in his cell, but nothing changed. Although John wondered whether his faith had been compromised, he held firm that Jesus was an important figure, certainly more significant than he, and was not ready to dismiss the work that he did prior to his incarceration. But John did question whether Jesus was possibly the forerunner to someone even greater, or whether the time of the full redemption that God had promised his people was perhaps being postponed once again.

With these doubts in mind, John sent several of his followers to Jesus with this message: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (vs.3). They brought this question to Jesus as he stood among the people.

In replying to their query, Jesus says first to John's disciples, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised . . ." (vs.4-5). That is what they can see as signs of this promise; and what they can hear is that "the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (vs.5). That is the message John needs to get; and then this, too: "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me" (vs.6). Jesus chooses here the form of beatitude because he knows that

John will persevere; but it is at the same time a warning, formulated as gently as possible, i.e., "Don't take offense and you will get through this."

Once John's disciples have left, Jesus turns to the crowd. His attitude is, as always, that of a mediator, moved by compassion for the people—the crowd for whom life is difficult, who live in such serious times when it comes to major decisions regarding the kingdom of heaven, who have first listened to John the Baptist and are now listening to him. He turns to them compassionately to let them see something of the significance of the times in which they are living and something of the erroneous relationship and attitude that they have adopted, at least in part, with respect to their times.

Jesus first speaks to the crowd about John the Baptist, asking them who they think John is. Oh, they have found it all rather amazing—John preaching in the wilderness, staying out there all by himself. They went out to see him, fascinated by what he had to say. Some even let themselves be baptized, receiving the baptism of repentance. For others, that was too much; they just found him to be different and even interesting, and they didn't hesitate to say so when they returned to town, asking things like "Did you hear how he was dressed? Do you know what he eats? A remarkable guy, indeed!" At least, that was how it was when he was still out there. But now that he is in prison and has begun to doubt, they had heard what his disciples asked Jesus—that's pretty amazing! But they will soon be saying to others—given John's second-guessing—"this guy John is no different than we are! It is fascinating to hear once in a while that such a rock-solid preacher, who always knew better than others, is, for a change, now himself confused."

"What did you go out in the wilderness to see?" asks Jesus. Someone whose coat was made of camel's hair? Is that why he was so interesting? And given what we have just heard from him, from John in his difficulties and gloom, "What did you go out . . . to see? A reed swayed by the wind?" (vs.7).

Jesus continues, moving from how the people saw John to how Jesus saw him; that is, telling the crowd who John is in actuality. He was not out to be an interesting personality. Those who saw him as such had it wrong and missed the mark when

it came to determining what John meant for Israel and in the kingdom of heaven. They didn't have a clue. John was no more "interesting" a figure than was Elijah the Tishbite. In fact, the Scriptures are not about people who are "interesting." What is important in Scripture is never people, at least no more important than the fact that God is interested in them. God is always the most important one.

His focus here is on a certain kind of play, namely, on playing with reality, on playing with the times within which one is placed by God.

That was true for Elijah as well, who played such a principal role. He endured horrible low points in his struggle with Ahab. But remember: when he was doing what needed to be done, nothing more is said of him than that his name was Elijah, the Tishbite, "from Tishbe in Gilead," because he needed to be distinguished from the many others at the same time with the same name. That is all we know of Elijah's past; nothing is said about his family or lineage. His role was all about his message, a message that comes to him as a flash of light from heaven when he meets Ahab for the first time (1 Kings 17:1): "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." That is not "interesting." It is a *divine* message. Those who say "that's troubling" or "that gives me goose bumps" do not understand this message from God; they fail to comprehend that God is speaking here to a renegade king who has enticed the people into worshipping Baal and Asherah. The God of Israel has been left in the dust, pushed to the side for the likes of these two. Religious devotion for these people meant that when rejoicing over the bounty of the harvest, they should seek to mimic these "gods" through the "pious" practice of lascivious sexuality. When men and women, those who struggled in their youth already with all kinds of drives and desires deep within their veins, were told that this is what "doing their devotions" was all about, any incentive to self-control in service to the LORD was obliterated.

So, when someone comes and announces, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve. . . ," that person is earnestly serious. But there is more here than judgment; there is also grace. That is to say, there is a sign here of the power of God, who rails against the people of Israel precisely because he loves them so dearly, because he will not let go of them, because he remains busy with them, because he will in his grace soon take his people back.

That, says Jesus, was Elijah's message. In saying this, Christ, here as elsewhere, stands solidly in the line of the Old Testament. Elijah made such an impression on the later prophets that even the final verses of the Old Testament speak of him—with implicit reference to John the Baptist:

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you . . . [and he will turn] the hearts of the children to their parents, [so that I will not] come and strike the land with total destruction." (Malachi 4:4-5)

And then Jesus said, regarding John, "And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come" (vs. 14).

Jesus continues, moving from talking *about* the people's take on who John was, to talking *to* the crowd regarding the danger of their frivolously frittering their days away, the days during which John and Jesus were among them: "To what can I compare this generation?"

There is at least an ounce of disdain in Jesus' word choice in "this generation." His reference is not to gender or to genealogy—Scripture never speaks to gender or genealogy per se with disdain—but specifically to *this* (kind of) generation. That is why you should not apply his words to everyone who heard these words. There were also those there who *did* take John seriously and *had* received the baptism of repentance. They found him more than "interesting"; they had listened to what he had to say and recognized in his words the very Word of God. Jesus does not speak condescendingly to them but to those whose response to John was more playfully lighthearted. Jesus reproaches them for playing with the times in which God has placed them: "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children [playing] in the marketplaces. . . ."

Do note that Jesus does not use dismissive words about the play of children, or of their parents—that they take time to exercise or to relax after

a busy day of work. His focus here is on a certain kind of play, namely, on playing with reality, on playing with the times within which one is placed by God.

There are, of course, different forms of play, something Jesus understands, in making a reference to children in the marketplace. First, they're playing "wedding"—something kids today are still prone to do, with dress-up or not, because playing this or that sparks their imagination. But then, all of a sudden, at least in this case, everything changes. You don't play wedding with just one or two, but with many others, playing their part as wedding party, guests, or pastor, etc. But, given so many roles to play, inevitably some begin to object, and the playful making-believe dissipates into thin air, especially after a funeral procession makes its way through the marketplace and tips the children's fantasy in that direction. "Well, okay, we'll play funeral then, if that is what you guys prefer." But even though the form of their play changes, they continue *playing* all that afternoon.

As Jesus is saying, this generation of folks is playing away their lives. Yes, the form of their play may well change, but the deeper issue surfaces in what they call out to those others who will not play along with them. As we read in Matthew, "They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'" With their games fizzled, because the others would not play along, these children call out, blaming the spoilsports.

So, who are these killjoys? We read in what follows that the first "spoilsport" is John the Baptist, the second, Christ himself.

The Jews were playing their games when John came on the scene. Their pretensions were that they, as the seed of Abraham, were God's chosen people and that, because they lived in the Promised Land, no harm could come their way. But John was not willing to "play wedding" with them, that is, to play along with their ode to joy. His response was, rather, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2). He was saying, in other words, "Great things are going to happen, and God asks that you make preparations if you are his people. You will yourselves witness that he is going to do

what has never happened before: his promises fulfilled once and for all. Have your eyes wide open and take note of what God will be doing. Stop talking about yourselves; you're not who's important here." John continued, "And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (3:9). So too, regarding the land that they inhabit, "The ax is already at the root of the trees. . ." (3:10). So, he was implying, "be careful, folks, that in playing me (John) off as a spoilsport, you do not forfeit your last chances."

The crowd responded to John's words with cat-calls, castigating him for being a stick-in-the-mud. He was a no-good spoilsport who groused about everything. And with that they gave him the cold shoulder, just like children at play. They took the lead, but John was not about to play their game. Not that he wanted to take the lead; he left it up to God to speak—but that was not what this generation wanted.

After this story, a second follows. As they have now turned to "play funeral," it is now Jesus' turn to be the "spoilsport." The form of their play, to the extent that they can play their part, changes little as they now take on the dark tenor of John the Baptist—as though it were just a matter of intonation. The Pharisees bemoan the fact that there are Gentiles in the Holy Land. The Roman occupation is *the* thorn in their flesh. And as for their own high calling, they know the Word, for the interpretation of everything was entrusted to them, and they know the law.

And then comes Jesus, who is not about to join in their playing funeral. He is not someone who looks over the masses with a gloomy heart or a haughty air about him. Inner compassion is what moves him, something quite different from the attitude of the Pharisees. He dares to say to Levi, a tax collector and cheat, "I must stay at your house today—dining later with women of ill repute as well. This is not to say that Jesus degrades himself by frequenting the company of publicans and sinners to do, along with them, what they are up to. He approves of nothing that is immoral.

The wonder of it all is that Levi, having come into contact with Jesus, is changed by him; the guest becomes the host, and Levi is overjoyed,

promising that things will change in his life, given the reality of his conversion. To this, Jesus can only say, “amen!”: “Today salvation has come to this house . . .” (Luke 19:9). And as for those sinful women, they feel touched more by a man (actually the only man in all of world history) who is utterly free than by all those others, who have condemned them. Ashamed of their ways and yet emboldened because they “get” him, they come not with erotic intrigue but with their love; they can’t help themselves—the love of thankfulness. Do you remember the prostitute who stooped at Jesus’ feet and began to wet his feet with her tears and then dried them with her hair (Luke 7:38)? That is the kind of love that Jesus fosters.

Even though Jesus unravels the game the Pharisees are playing, they want to keep playing it. They see John, who “came neither eating nor

drinking,” as well as Jesus, who “came eating and drinking,” as nothing more than spoilsports, out to ruin their game. They continue to insist on taking the lead, and they dismiss Jesus as nothing more than “a glutton and a drunkard,” as someone who simply loves to party and is not overly choosy when it comes to those who join him. Do you see here how the times in which these people lived—and in which John had first appeared on the scene and in which Jesus stood—is captured in that simple illustration of the games people play and their “spoilsport” retort?

And what does this all have to do with us? Well, there are probably some in our midst—and please don’t generalize—to whom this applies. Fortunately, there are also others—for the Holy Spirit is always at work—who, through the preaching of God’s law, come to know him.