

# Actors, Swords, and Racetracks: Tertullian on Entertainment Madness in Ancient Rome

We live in an entertainment-saturated world. To illustrate this, let's enter into any given home on a relaxing Saturday evening. Dad and son have their feet up on the couch, shouting with glee as two hockey players draw blood at center ice. Meanwhile, mom rests in the living room, taking pleasure in the promiscuous and slanderous behavior of the characters in her fiction book. Another brother sits downstairs, heart racing with excitement as he shoots and mutilates hundreds of enemy soldiers with a controller and TV. Sister is not home—she received free tickets from a friend to listen to the band everyone's been talking about lately.

Why another article on entertainment, you ask? Have we not long ago lost our battle against movies? Have not the comedies, music, and virtual realities of our world influenced the mind of our young people and young adults to such an extent that renewing the battle is a vain effort? By no means, is our cry! *Beacon Lights*, with the ancient church, must fight the battle against sinful entertainment. In a day in which church magazines advertise, rate, and review movies, and much of the church-world is swept up by the pleasures of our age, we stand with the ancient church against such worldliness.

Recently, I read a piece called *The Shows (De Spectaculis)*, written by the church father Tertullian (150-220 or 240 A.D.). Little is known of Tertullian, but historians believe he labored either in Carthage or in Rome. You may have heard it said before that our society today, especially Western society, closely reflects ancient Rome. I was taken aback by the application that Tertullian's warnings concerning entertainment and pleasure in Rome has for today. As you read this article, I hope that you, too, are simply astounded by the richness of instruction by the hand of this man, and apply it to your life as I have to mine. I was also struck how much I, and we all, have become so desensitized to the sinful entertainments and pleasures in our lives. I hope that Tertullian's piece can serve the purpose that it makes us more sensitive to the sin all around us, and more eager to serve God even in this pleasure-laden world. I want to present Tertullian's instructive and insightful discussion on entertainment and pleasure in ancient Rome, and then apply his teaching to today. After treating his discussion, we will briefly look at the proper view of entertainment, according to Tertullian.

To start off, Tertullian reminds his readers that the places and things used in the service of sin are not of themselves sinful. God created all things good; it is we who corrupt them. Says Tertullian,

It cannot, then, be thought that what exists by God's own creative will is either foreign or hostile to Him; and if it is not opposed to Him, it cannot be regarded as injurious to His worshippers, as certainly it is not foreign to them. Beyond all doubt, too, the very buildings connected with the places of public amusement, composed as they are of rocks, stones, marbles, pillars, are things of God, Who has given these various things for the earth's embellishment.

Perhaps this is obvious, but it is a necessary starting point. Hollywood corrupts with its filth, not your television; Nashville contaminates with its music laced with revenge, fornication, and drunkenness, not the radio itself.

But that which God has created good becomes a medium for sin by depraved man. Tertullian writes that the sport of equestrianism, of itself, was not sinful, but it became sinful when it was brought into the games: "In former days equestrianism was practiced in a simple way on horseback, and certainly its ordinary use had nothing sinful in it; but when it was dragged into the games, it passed from the service of God into the employment of demons." Various aspects of equestrianism were dedicated to the gods; equestrianism, a good and pure activity of itself, became idolatrous when brought into the context of the games during that time.

Indeed, the games and entertainment of ancient Rome were permeated with all kinds of idolatry, and our entertainment today is no different. People do not dedicate college football games, soccer matches, and Hollywood productions to Jupiter or Mars. Yet, idolatry fills today's entertainment—the great idol of self. Take a look at entertainment or celebrity magazines in the check-out lanes of your local grocery store—woman X is divorcing man Y; so-and-so is suing so-and-so over some infringement on his rights; at bottom, these celebrities ask, what is good for me? Drug addiction, alcoholism, and scandals run rampant in the professional sports programs. Commercials on the radio and television aim at self-improvement, self-gratification, and self-worship. Take away the names of the gods and goddesses, insert the idols above under the great umbrella of "self," and the idolatry of Rome once again becomes manifest.

Tertullian not only charges sinful entertainment in ancient Rome for its idolatry, but also warns Christians of their duty to avoid entertainment because of the heathen people themselves in those places where the games and shows take place. Such a command can be found in Scripture. Tertullian states,

Well, we never find it expressed with the same precision [what he means here is that one cannot find this kind of command word for word in Scripture], “Thou shalt not enter circus or theater, thou shalt not look on combat or show;” as it is plainly laid down, “Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not worship an idol; thou shalt not commit adultery or fraud.” But we find that the first word of David bears on this very sort of thing [going to the circuses or theaters and combats or shows]: “Blessed,” he says, “is the man who has not gone into the assembly of the impious, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of scorers.”

Tertullian broadly applies this verse to the shows and games of his day. No Christian ought to be found at the places where the heathen congregate. Tertullian, then, not only has in mind the entertainment itself, but the *unbelievers* present at the places of entertainment.

What Tertullian has to say about avoiding the gatherings of unbelievers is applicable to us today. What about those with whom we fellowship when we attend entertainment venues? We can be quick to judge the entertainment itself, but sometimes we don't think of the *people* watching the entertainment. Are the fans present at country music concerts those who are zealous for the worship of God? But the questions become harder, and involve even our attendance at sporting events, of themselves not sinful: what about our fellowship among those at a hockey game, for example, where swearing, gluttony, and drunkenness can be found? While I believe Christians may watch sports, Tertullian does seem to prick us where we do not want to be pricked. What effect does our fellowshiping with unbelievers have upon our hearts, even if the entertainment is not, for the most part, sinful of itself? It is true—we must live in the world, but our calling is to live not of the world. We must work with unbelievers, shop with unbelievers, etc.; but it's another thing to entertain ourselves with unbelievers. Let us as young people and young adults discuss this point of Tertullian among ourselves and think about it carefully!

Tertullian does not stop with blaming sinful entertainment for its idolatry and for its erosion of the antithetical life, but makes one more devastating argument against Christian attendance at the shows. He does this by comparing the things of God with the sinful characteristics of entertainment in his day:

God has enjoined us to deal calmly, gently, quietly, and peacefully with the Holy Spirit, because these things are alone in keeping with the goodness of His nature, with His tenderness and sensitiveness, and not to vex Him with rage, ill-nature, anger, or grief. Well, how shall this be made to accord with the shows? For the show always leads to spiritual agitation, since where there is pleasure, there is keenness of feeling giving pleasure its zest; and where there is keenness of feeling, there is rivalry giving in turn its zest to that. Then, too, where you have rivalry, you have rage, bitterness,

wrath and grief, with all bad things which flow from them—the whole entirely out of keeping with the religion of Christ.

Place yourself for a moment in the coliseum at Rome. You sit among the thousands of spectators as they yell wildly and shake their fists at two gladiators who are fighting to the death. The men around you have placed bets on a certain gladiator to win the battle; another man curses because his fighter is on the losing end; as you glance behind you, a woman is absolutely transfixed on the scene, unable to take her eyes away for a moment, perspiring heavily in her nervous anticipation. Hardly an environment for Christians!

Tertullian addresses our hearts. He speaks the Word of God when he says Christians must deal calmly, gently, quietly, and peacefully. He makes clear that the Bible forbids us to vex God with rage, ill-nature, anger, or grief. We too, with the church father, must examine the direction of our hearts when we place ourselves among the fellowship of unbelievers in the amusements of this world, as we watch the gruesome horror movie or the comedy with dirty jokes, or as we listen to certain kinds of music promoting an immoral lifestyle. What is filling our hearts and minds? Psychologists are dead-wrong when they judge video game violence, for example, merely by the outward rage it causes in teenagers. Sin starts in the heart. Sin is already found in the ungodly passions of our flesh. It does not matter that rock music does not lead you and me to an outward life given to the service of the devil in sin, for it has corrupted the heart already with its wicked lyrics. We, Christian young people and young adults, may never justify our use of sinful entertainment because we say it has no outwardly sinful effects on our behavior—Tertullian demonstrates that sin starts in the heart.

Because Tertullian speaks of sin present already in the heart, he forces us as Christians to be very strict with respect to what we allow for our entertainment. Sinful entertainment is not a matter of Christian liberty. We must always measure our entertainment against the standard of God's Word. We may, I believe, and we must, as parents and young people, make definite lists for ourselves: what is acceptable (Christian) entertainment, and what is unacceptable (sinful) entertainment? Certainly, we must then agree, for instance, that all video games with shooting of humans, no matter the enemy and the circumstances, are sinful, because they excite in the heart the lust for blood and murder; much of country music glorifies drunkenness, fornication, greed, and a multitude of other sins, and ought to be detestable to the Christian; books are not exempt from criticism, either—no Christian ought to read literature that glorifies sin, for sin is horrifying to the child of God; the same can and should be said concerning television, movies, the internet, and all other forms of entertainment.

But Tertullian does not end his writing with the negative. I include here a lengthy quotation, simply breathtaking in beauty—truly a treasure from church history! With these thrilling words we positively conclude our treatment of the Christian and entertainment:

With such dainties [the sinful entertainments] as these let the devil's guests be feasted. The places and the times, the inviter too, are theirs. Our banquets, our nuptial joys, are yet to come. We cannot sit down in fellowship with them, as neither can they with us. Things in this matter go by their turns. Now they have gladness and we are troubled. "The world," says Jesus, "shall rejoice; ye shall be sorrowful." Let us mourn, then, while the heathen are merry, that in the day of their sorrow we may rejoice; lest, sharing now in their gladness, we share then also in their grief. Thou art too dainty, Christian, if thou wouldst have pleasure in this life as well as in the next; nay, a fool thou art, if thou thinkest this life's pleasures to be really pleasures. The philosophers, for instance, give the name of pleasure to quietness and repose; in that they have their bliss; in that they find entertainment: they even glory in it. You long for the goal, and the stage, and the dust, and the place of combat! I would have you answer me this question: Can we not live without pleasure, who cannot but with pleasure die? For what is our wish but the apostle's, to leave the world, and be taken up into the fellowship of our Lord? You have your joys where you have your longings. Even as things are, if your thought is to spend this period of existence in enjoyments, how are you so ungrateful as to reckon insufficient, as not thankfully to recognize the many and exquisite pleasures God has bestowed upon you? For what more delightful than to have God the Father and our Lord at peace with us, than revelation of the truth, than confession of our errors, than pardon of the innumerable sins of our past life? What greater pleasure than distaste of pleasure itself, contempt of all that the world can give, true liberty, a pure conscience, a contented life, and freedom from all fear of death? What nobler than to tread under foot the gods of the nations—to exorcise evil spirits—to perform cures—to seek divine revealings—to live to God? These are the pleasures, these the spectacles that befit Christian men—holy, everlasting, free. Count of these as your circus games, fix your eyes on the courses of the world, the gliding seasons, reckon up the periods of time, long for the goal of the final consummation, defend the societies of the churches, be startled at God's signal, be roused up at the angel's trump, glory in the palms of martyrdom. If the literature of the stage delight you, we have literature in abundance of our own—plenty of verses, sentences, songs, proverbs; and these not fabulous, but true; not tricks of art, but plain realities. Would you have also fightings and wrestlings? Well, of these there is no lacking, and they are not of slight account. Behold unchastity overcome by chastity, perfidy slain by faithfulness, cruelty stricken by compassion, impudence thrown into the shade by modesty: these are the contests we have among us, and in these we win our crowns. Would you have something of blood too? You have Christ's.

