

# Serve Him With Mirth

## *The Place of Humor in the Christian Life*

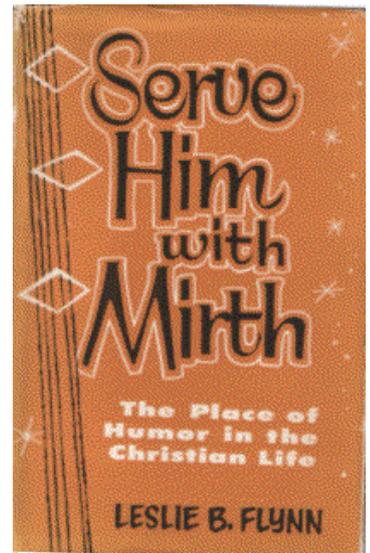
By LESLIE B. FLYNN

“Laughter rings out countless times a day in every hamlet around the world where normal conditions prevail. Strangely, some Christians give the impression that indulgence in laughter betrays a low level of spirituality, whereas gloom indicates godliness. But the truth is, laughter can go hand in hand with a deeply spiritual life.”

With these words the author introduces his subject – one of the most interesting in human experience – humor. Theories of the origin of humor, the place of humor in the lives of early Christian leaders, the fact that some Puritans thought it was sin to look at flowers, lest they be tempted to frivolity – these and other background insights into humor are skillfully woven into the chapters of this book. With reverence and respect for the Scriptures, Pastor Flynn also discusses “Humor in the Bible,” “The Humor of Jesus,” and “God’s Final Laughter”.

An appendix contains more than 150 anecdotes and stories arranged alphabetically according to subject, all dealing with some aspect of religious life and suitable as illustrations in sermons, etc.

Written to meet the need for a right perspective of humor with relation to the Christian faith, this book will be useful for all Christians and especially for ministers and lay speakers.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of Canada, Leslie B. Flynn received all of his higher education in the United States, after graduating from high school and business college in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. He is a graduate of the Moody Bible Institute and *Wheaton College* (B.A.). From the Chicago area he moved to Pennsylvania where he received his B.D. degree at *Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary* in Philadelphia and his A.M. in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania.

He pastored the *Bethlehem Baptist Church* of St. Clair, Pennsylvania, from 1944-9. From 1949-89 he was pastor of *Grace Baptist Church* in Nanuet, New York, and is now Pastor Emeritus.

He has also been active in journalism and education, acting as regional editor of *Christian Life Magazine*, writing many articles for Christian publications, and serving as an instructor and Assistant Professor of Journalism in journalism in *Nyack Missionary College* 1961-72. He also served on the boards of *World Relief* and *Denver Seminary*, and broadcast weekly in the New York area for 24 years.

Leslie Flynn has authored about 40 books: some are in print, including the best-selling *19 Gifts of the Spirit*; others are still available second-hand (e.g. from [abebooks.com](http://abebooks.com)). His wife, Bernice Carlson Flynn, was Family Editor of *Christian Life Magazine*. The Flynn's have seven daughters.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE E-BOOK EDITION

Is humor a forgotten area of Christian ministry? Leslie Flynn’s classic book is one of a handful on this subject published in the past 50 years, and it remains the only book to cover all aspects in detail.

When this book was first published, back in 1960, the church was a much more formal institution. Along with the rest of society, we have all loosened up somewhat since then! Humor is certainly used far more widely these days within Christian ministry. And the therapeutic role of humor in health, both mental and physical, has been proven by clinical trials. The message of the book is remarkably undated, and it remains highly relevant today.

Despite the changes of the last half-century, I am not sure that the church as a whole understands the biblical context, indeed mandate, to use humor. And many find it very hard to perceive the extent to which humor and whimsy is embedded into the vast majority of the books of the Bible. The cultural and linguistic gap between us and the books of the Old and New Testaments can prevent us understanding the frequent use of irony, whimsy, word-play and puns. We expect no humor, so we see none.

This is tragic, because humor has a remarkable role, especially in evangelism. It is a way of smuggling truth past people’s defenses into their hearts. It should be seen as an integral part of effective Christian communication and proclamation. This theme is developed within the *Web Evangelism Guide*, in this section about humor:

[www.gospelcom.net/guide/humor](http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/humor)

Our grateful thanks go to Leslie Flynn for permission to reproduce this valuable, balanced, biblical view of humor.

Tony Whittaker, *Web Evangelism Guide* [www.web-evangelism.com](http://www.web-evangelism.com) 2004

**Printing:** this book prints out in 10pt text, at about 75 pages, or 57 pages excluding the appendix.

**Bible quotations:** are from the KJV, which was in universal use at the time the book was written. They follow the KJV house-style of no capitalization for divine pronouns, although elsewhere in the text, such capitalization is used.

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by

LESLIE B. FLYNN



ZONDERVAN PUBLISHING HOUSE  
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TO  
*my godly parents,*  
JAMES A. FLYNN AND AGNES G. FLYNN,  
*whose Irish wit and sweet sense of humor I learned  
early in life to appreciate*

## PREFACE

Laughter rings out countless times a day in every hamlet around the world where normal conditions prevail. Strangely, some Christians give the impression that indulgence in laughter betrays a low level of spirituality, whereas gloom indicates godliness. But the truth is, laughter can go hand in hand with a deeply spiritual life.

Because God has made us so, humor is universally human. One chapter of this book analyzes the major factors that trigger laughter. The benefits which derive from proper humor are described. Then the limits beyond which humor passes into bad taste, and even sin, are outlined. Other topics include humor in the Bible, the humor of Jesus, which many times must have evoked laughter from His hearers, and God's final laughter.

Confessedly, the theme of laughter is not the most momentous subject facing our world today. But it should not be forgotten that the Great Physician prescribes merry medicine as a tonic for the soul. Laughter has its place in the divine economy for smoothing some of the saints' tensions and giving vent to their joys.

**Leslie B. Flynn**

*Nanuet, New York 1960*

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## DUCKS III

by Frederick W. Harvey

*When God finished the stars and the whirl of colored suns,  
He turned His mind from big things to fashion little ones,  
Beautiful tiny things (like daisies) He made, and then  
He made the comical ones in case the minds of men  
Should stiffen and become  
Dull, humorless and glum:  
And so forgetful of their Maker be  
As to take even themselves – quite seriously.  
Caterpillars and cats are lively and excellent puns:  
All God's jokes are good – even the practical ones!  
And as for the duck, I think God must have smiled a bit  
Seeing those bright eyes blink on the day He fashioned it.  
And He's probably laughing still  
At the sound that came out of its bill.*

# CHAPTER 1

## Does God Want Us to Laugh?

### Humor and the Christian faith!

The linking of these two subjects in the same breath will undoubtedly result in exclamation points. Any suggestion of possible association between two seemingly unrelated spheres will probably raise quizzical eyebrows and give vent to expressions of subdued surprise.

Those who feel this combination to be a major mismatch reason thus: "Humor deals with the secular; the Bible delves into the sacred. Humor borders on the sinful; the Bible breathes holiness. These two themes belong to different areas, perhaps even mutually exclusive."

The impression seems to prevail among some people that Christians should beware of humor. Little Janet was visiting her grandfather's farm. Grandpa, a religious man, always serious and sombre, would tolerate no merriment. Seeking relief from the oppressive gloom, little Janet wandered out to the farm where she spotted a donkey. Noting its sad look, she said dolefully as she patted its long face, "Poor donkey, you've got grandpa's religion, too!"

How prone people are to associate the sunny, smiling face with the shallow, superficial disposition, and to link up the sad countenance with deep piety! Joy is considered a satanic instrument and melancholy a divine characteristic. Spurgeon quoted a couplet to describe those who hold this view:

Who think all virtue lies in gravity,  
And smiles are symptoms of depravity. [1]

Perhaps somber clergymen have unwittingly abetted the notion that gloom indicates godliness. A deacon, scrutinizing passengers as they alighted from the train, was trying to pick out the visiting preacher whom he was scheduled to entertain but whom he had never seen.

Selecting a likely fellow he asked, "Pardon me, but are you a minister?"

"No," came the curt reply, "it's my indigestion that makes me look like this!"

Much of our suspicion of humor can be traced to the Puritan forefathers for whom life was stern. Richard Baxter, who penned over a hundred articles, including *A Serious Call to the Unconverted*, never wrote a light line. According to Edward Irving, "Laughter is a kind of bacchanalian state of the mind just as drunkenness is a bacchanalian state of the body. It is a rather violent change in the law and order of nature to which it is not willingly inclined if sanctified." [2]

The sermons of John Wesley, the Arminian, contain no jokes or humorous anecdotes [3], and Augustus Toplady, author of "Rock of Ages" and a Calvinist, is said to have likened prankful children to fountains of iniquity. The seventeenth-century pietist, August H. Francke, forbade children to smile in his orphanages, for he regarded humor and fun as nearly sacrilegious. If some Puritans refused to gaze at beautiful flowers since they were of this world and liable to detract from heavenly matter [4], it is not surprising that they likewise thought humor a sin worthy of repentance. But classic Puritanism had its exceptions as the milk of human humor spilled out on occasions, both consciously and unconsciously, as the following chapter will illustrate.

The reason for Puritan sternness was its reaction against the riotous mirth and bawdy frolics of the Elizabethan stage. Because many wits gave their humor talent over to debauchery, the Puritans revolted against this swashbuckling frivolity. Sweeping across life with usual thoroughness, they closed the theatres, banned Shakespeare and pushed the pendulum to the other extreme. Their stem approach found confirmation in remarks which Christ and the apostles made. They would say, "Jesus condemned worthless speaking. He never laughed. Furthermore, Paul rebuked foolish speaking and jesting."

Their influence pervaded much of Christian thinking on this subject. In the late eighteenth century, John Newton, rector of St. Mary Woolnoth in England, better known as author of many well-known hymns, among them "Amazing Grace" and "Safely Through Another Week", asked a friend, "What would you think of seeing a dray-horse jump over St. Paul's Cathedral?" Then he added, "This would be no more than a flea does, in proportion to its size, when it jumps".

When this remark was circulated it resulted in no small stir among Newton's friends. A witticism from him was a matter of concern to others. Because it almost made one laugh, it was a suspicious approximation to a sin. At a ministers' meeting at that time this saying became a topic of consideration. The verdict was that his words were a near-witticism, just shaving the edge of a precipice. He was excused on the grounds that the comment came from his genius rather than his levity. [5]

William. Kethe, a refugee in Geneva, Switzerland, from the persecutions of England's Bloody Mary in the sixteenth century, found the Calvinists using the Psalms in French metrical versions, so translated them directly from the Hebrew into English. A line from "Old Hundredth" read, "Him serve with mirth, his praise forthtell." This was changed by later English divines who considered it too light to: "Him serve with *fear*, his praise forthtell."

To this day many Christians feel that joking is wrong. As students gathered around their assigned table for breakfast at Bible college each morning, someone would invariably drop a humorous remark. And just as invariably, a deeply spiritual boy would look up in stern fashion from his New Testament, clear his throat and intone with sepulchral solemnity, "Brethren, remember, every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement."

If such reasonings are true, then no laugh should ever ring again, no word of wit pass our lips, no smile at humor cross our faces, nor should we repeat anything funny. Many of the pleasantries of social intercourse would be forever banned! What a drab, dull, dreary world this would be! Doesn't God want us to laugh?

Distrust of humor in Christian circles may be indicated by the omission or near-omission of humor from the Christian press. Secular joke books are a dime a dozen for children as well as adults, but few books of humor treating religious subjects have appeared, except for a few volumes on the funny side of parsonage life. The comical that constantly occurs in life all around us is captured by secular magazines but goes unmentioned by much of the sacred press.

A few Christian periodicals attempt some humor, such as *Christianity Today's* "Eutychus and His Kin", and the *Watchman-Examiner's* column "Just for Fun". In contrast to this minimal usage by religious magazines, whole sections on humor are featured by many major secular publications like the *Reader's Digest*. Though some fillers may be risqué, many are acceptable by Christian standards. Oddly enough, if one is hunting for humorous stories relating to churches, choirs, congregations and "religion" in general, he will be far more likely to find such in the secular press. Ben Hibbs, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, once stated at a Christian journalism conference in Philadelphia that he rarely received requests from Protestant religious periodicals to reprint jokes and cartoons appearing in the *Post*.

*Newsweek's* religious section recently carried a picture of the newly appointed Dean of New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine and his cartoon collection. For years Dr. John V. Butler has been saving humor cartoons on clergymen. He estimates that ninety per cent of his collection came from secular magazines, and only ten percent from religious publications.

Admittedly, Christian periodicals stress the serious aspects of life and death. Because slanted to eternal values, little or no room remains for lighter things. When subjects like sin, atonement, angels, the Trinity, demons, heaven, hell, resurrection and predestination consume our attention, how can one in the same pages descend from the sublime to the ridiculous? Since space is at a premium, how incongruous to waste it on levity! Yet may not this de-emphasis of humor tend to give the impression that Christianity and humor are incompatible? Many people may wonder if God approves of humor.

A nineteenth-century English pastor gave a series of lectures to his youth entitled, "Tangled Talk on the Use and Abuse of Wit and Humor". He began by saying, "Perhaps some of you fail to see any connection between wit and humor on the one hand, and prayer and praise on the other. The song of praise and the cry of prayer before a message on such a topic may shock you as out of place. But the Christian faith has to do with everything with which we have to do. If we can't ask God's blessing on this subject, then we shouldn't discuss it. The title of my lectures will not, I hope, raise the expectation of a comic entertainment. The object is, not to make you laugh, but to make you think about a certain question in Christian ethics. Humor is a subject that touches us almost every hour. Right views about it may brighten life. Wrong views may issue in harm to our souls and society. God guide us!"

The thesis of this book is that humor need not be sneaked in the back door of the Christian life to be surreptitiously enjoyed like forbidden fruit, but, rather, that humor has a legitimate, lofty and integral place in Christian experience. God does wish us to enjoy humor. Following are six reasons, some of which will be amplified in later chapters.

## 1. GOD HAS CREATED MAN TO ENJOY HUMOR

Why is it that of all the creatures in the world only man can laugh? Why, on hearing something funny, does a person throw back his head, open his mouth, and with chest heaving to and fro as though in convulsions, laugh as his breath pumps out in explosive puffs. The answer is because God has made him so.

Created in the image of his Maker, man has rationality or the ability to reason. Called the light of God in the soul, reason permits man to note the incongruities of life. Since incongruity is the essence of humor, we would never laugh had not God made us the way He did, for these incongruities would then escape us.

Humor belongs to the nature of man from even before the fall. Shall man refuse to laugh when he remembers who made him this way? "Know ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves . . ." (Psalm 100:3). He has made us with the powers, capacities and instincts that enter into our vital constitution, including the faculty of humor. Let us thank Him for every good, as well as perfect, gift.

Although it is true that since the Fall the intellect has been darkened and humor often tainted as in much of radio and TV comedy, yet the faculty of humor can be sanctified and restored to its God-given position. The Christian faith doesn't war against man's use of humor but against his abuse of humor.

## 2. GOD APPRECIATES HUMOR

Humor is not only human but it seems divine. We must avoid creating a god in man's own image. However, if man is made in God's image, part of which involves the appreciation of humor, does it not seem logical to deduce that God must be capable of creating and enjoying humor?

The Bible ascribes laughter to God. How ridiculously humorous for men to plot strategy against an all-powerful God. No wonder "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision" (Psalm 2:4). A relationship exists between humor and the laugh of superiority. "Milton is bold enough in *Paradise Lost* to put jest on the lips of deity. When Lucifer and the angels revolted, with grim humor the Almighty declares,

Nearly it now concerns us to be sure  
Of our omnipotence . . . (v, 721-22)." [6]

## 3. GOD HAS GIVEN MAN AN ENVIRONMENT WITH A TOUCH OF THE COMICAL

A little meditation on the various kinds of creatures in God's animal world should teach us that God has a sense of humor. Not only has He created the category of the comical but He has stocked our surroundings with creatures to tickle our sense of humor. Even if the animals are unfunny to God, He knew they would give us many a laugh. At the zoo people invariably exclaim, "Look, isn't it funny?" Some look funny; others act that way.

Who fails to be amused by the skyscraper neck of the giraffe? Or by the vacuum cleaner mouth of the anteater? Or by the built-in baby buggy of the kangaroo? Or by the freakishness of the duck-billed, web-footed, flat-tailed platypus? Or by the toothpick legs of the brightly colored flamingo? Who is not amused by the antics of the monkeys in the cage? Or by the squeaky phrases of the parrot? Or by a kitten stealthily stalking a windblown leaf like a lion its prey in the jungle? Or by the revolving head of the praying mantis? Or by the strutting of the peacock? Or by the mimicry of the saucy little mockingbird which naturalists tell us can imitate the songs of forty other birds, always trilling each phrase at least a half dozen times? Or by the wild chuckwalla which when frightened actually do inflate themselves like balloons to scare their enemies?

Mark Twain once described a camel as an "ostrich with an extra set of legs.' It was a camel that once provoked the saintly Robert Murray M'Cheyne of Scotland to the only bit of wit found anywhere in his writings. Sent by his denomination on a missionary survey trip of the Near East, he had frequent occasion to ride on a camel. He described how a pilgrim feels as he mounts a camel that in turn slowly rises. "As he goes up with you on his back, you feel as if you were bidding farewell to all sublunary things, but when he begins to move, you are strongly reminded of your terrestrial affinities."

The numerous forms or motions in nature that seem grotesque, fantastic, laughable or playful, suggest that humor forms part of divine perfection. These things that make for merriment in us were created by God. Over their counterparts at the beginning God proclaimed His verdict, "Very good." It seems that the Creator intended man to have in moderate measure the pure enjoyment of comicality.

Dear God, we make you so solemn,  
So stiff and old and staid.  
How can we be so stupid  
When we look at the things you've made?

How can we miss the twinkle,  
That must have been in your eye  
When you planned the hippopotamo  
And the rhinoceri?

Who watches an ostrich swallow,  
Then doubts that you like to play,

Or questions your sense of humor,  
 Hearing a donkey bray?  
 Could the God who made the monkey  
 Have forgotten how to laugh.  
 Or the one who striped the zebra  
 And stretched out the giraffe?  
 How could an oldish person  
 Fashion a pelican.  
 Or a perfectly sober Creator  
 Ever imagine man?  
 – HELEN SALSBURY

No wonder Lincoln said, “God must have meant us to laugh. Else He would not have made so many mules, parrots, monkeys and human beings.”

#### **4. GOD’S BOOK CONTAINS MANY EXAMPLES OF HUMOR**

It should always be kept in mind that the Bible is first and foremost a serious book. Its solemn truths should not be tampered with. God’s revelation has been so set down in the Bible that its acceptance results in eternal life, but its rejection ends in eternal tragedy.

Though the Bible is a divinely inspired book, its subject matter involves human nature. If humor is part and parcel of human nature, humorous incidents should crop up from time to time in the Bible.

Dr. A. T. Pierson, author of several chapters in the well-known “Fundamentals”, a series of articles setting forth the main doctrines of historic Christianity, widely circulated in the early years of this century, also wrote a book, *Knowing the Scriptures*. In this volume he devotes a whole chapter to the subject of humor in the Bible which he entitles, “The Humorous Element in Scripture”. He says, “Humor has its legitimate place, province and office, even in sacred things. Biblical examples might be collated of every sort of weapon to be found in the whole armory of humor – wit, satire, irony, retort, ridicule, raillery, drollery, play on words – these and other forms of the ludicrous are employed by prophets, apostles, and some of them even by our Lord Himself as a means to rebuke and expose error and wrong and vindicate truth and right.” [7]

In preparation for this present book, I read through the Bible with the distinct purpose of picking out all possible references to humor. Considering humor in its broadest sense, and including examples of the wrong kind as well as of the good, I filled one hundred pages of a medium-sized loose-leaf notebook. These notes constitute the basis for three of the chapters that follow: “Humor in the Bible”, “The Humor of Jesus” and “God’s Final Laughter”.

#### **5. GOD’S SON USED HUMOR DURING HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY**

Since Jesus Christ took on Him human nature and lived on earth as man, Ideal Man to be sure, humor must have been interwoven in His humanity. Hastings says of Him, “He is a man speaking to man in the language of men, and pathos, contrast, humor, and spontaneity are the natural pleasant marks of that language. A smile is felt in His words, as in the words of all who see contradiction without loss of inner peace.” [8]

An entire chapter later in the book contains at least two dozen examples of wit scattered through His teachings. Son of Man as well as Son of God, Jesus Christ used humor.

#### **6. GOD HAS GIVEN HUMOR A PLACE IN REDEEMED HUMAN NATURE BY VIRTUE OF ITS CLOSE RELATIONSHIP TO JOY, PRAISE, AND PEACE**

##### **Related to joy**

A popular Bible teacher was publicly rebuked at a Bible conference for indulging in what some strait-laced people deemed too much humor. His reply was, “When I got saved, I got the joy of the Lord. I can’t help it if it runs over.”

Sometimes people laugh to cover up embarrassment or an empty heart. Usually they laugh because something is funny. But sanctified humor has its roots deeper than mere need for venting pent-up emotions. Godly humor springs from genuine Spirit-produced joy. Christianity is the “religion” of joy. The promised seed of Abraham was Isaac, whose name means “laughter” (Genesis 21:6). The spiritual seed of Abraham is Christ, who came to save us from our sins. If through faith in the promised

offspring of Abraham, Laughter (Isaac) and Jacob, we have been justified from all transgressions and have been restored to divine favor, able to sing –

My sin – oh, the bliss of this glorious thought –  
 My sin – not in part, but the whole,  
 Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,  
 Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

– then above all others we should be a joyful people. Will not this deep-rooted gladness spill over and express itself in many ways, one of which will be by entering in a right way into the wit and humor of life? A sense of humor, sanctified by the Spirit, has its place in the man possessing the new life in Christ.

Those who connect gloom with godliness misrepresent the Christian faith. The New Testament begins with the joyful, angelic tidings of Christ's birth and ends with the redeemed rejoicing around the throne. In Jesus' day people disfigured their faces to appear outwardly righteous, but the Saviour pierced beneath this waxed mask of artificial spirituality. He clearly stated that He wished that His joy might indwell His followers and that their joy might be full. In addition, Jesus commanded His followers to be cheerful despite impending tribulation. When disappointment and even disaster hem us in, when situations seem insurmountable, will not the joyful assurance that all things will work together for good to those that love God buoy us up? May we not laugh together at impossibilities, knowing that out of the tangled mess He will bring glory? May not the command to "rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4), involve the proper use of our humorous faculty?

## Related to Praise

Laughter and praise are closely related. The first item mentioned with the command to be filled with the Spirit is joyful praise (Ephesians 5:18–20). Contemplation of God's salvation, His goodness to us in the past, plus His prospects for us in the future, may lead us to shout with joyful laughter. The psalmist's expressions of praise seem intimately linked with laughter: "shout with joy", "be glad", "sing", "bless the Lord", "rejoice", "O give thanks unto the Lord", "O magnify the Lord", "exalt His name", "be joyful", "clap your hands", "sing praises", "make a joyful noise unto God", "blessed be the Lord". A later chapter will point out that laughter is often connected with a sense of superiority, enabling us to laugh at others. Contemplating God's superiority over all nations, the psalmist exclaims, ". . . shout unto God with the voice of triumph" (Psalm 47:1). This burst of praise could be paraphrased, ". . . shout unto God with the voice of laughter". Joy may be more than laughter, but it is not less.

Godly laughter is a gift of God to those in right relation to Him. For their persistent disobedience to God, the people of Judah suffered removal of genuine laughter during their seventy-year exile. The prophet had warned, "Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness" (Jeremiah 25: 10). But those in fellowship with the Lord in all ages can say, "Thou hast put gladness in my heart" (Psalm 4:7).

## Related to Peace

Humor is related to peace. Humor in its etymology meant "wetness" and is of same derivation as "humidity". Primitive medicine stated that the body contained four principal humors. If the flow was normal, man was in good humor; if irregular, man's ill humor showed up in disease. The word came to mean a whim dictated by one's condition, then drifted on to its present meaning. A good-humored person possesses a well-integrated disposition. Hastings states that "humor in its highest forms is the sign of a mind at peace with itself, for which the contrasts; and contradictions of life have ceased to jar, though they have not ceased to be".. [9]

Distinguishing among various kinds of laugh, psychologists point out that the joyful laugh is a bubbling over of good humor and occurs in people in a state of well-being. Godly humor springs from the peace of God.

A sense of humor has its place to play in a joyful zest for life. Is it not likely that God who created man with a sense of humor will use the humor in some way, not only to express that joy, but to buttress man in his struggles with the frustrations, tensions and depressions of life? Have you ever thought how intolerable life would be without humor? If our sense of humor went on a strike, the economy would be as endangered as if the railroads failed to function. Just try to get through twenty-four hours without making or hearing a joke! How unbearable the day!

Admittedly, the Christian life is real and earnest and serious, often demanding broken hearts. But no virtue resides in constant solemnity. Laughing can be as spiritual as singing or crying. A moderate and proper use of our sense of humor is not incompatible with the joy, praise and peace of a Spirit-led life.

The Christian faith should restore natural gifts to right use. Why should we give up humor on becoming a Christian? Should a musician on his conversion to Christ give up the use of note C or E? Should a writer stop using the letter M, or the mathematician refrain from the use of the number 3? Why should a Christian surrender the faculty of humor? Christianity involves the right employment of man's whole self, not a fiber nor a faculty left out.

In refuting the charge that humor is sinful levity, a nineteenth-century preacher argues rather spiritedly, "Levity! Brothers distinguish between light-headed and light-hearted; do not crush instincts which God has implanted, nor ban delights which He has provided. Do not torment your own souls, nor the souls of others, gratuitously. In no single thing impose on your own, or on theirs, a Pharisaic yoke. Make no artificial 'Slough of Despond' or 'Hill Difficulty', or 'Valley of the Shadow of Death'. Do not strain the bow too continuously. Do not, if you can help it, allow any Christian humorist to stand gagged and writhing before his Lord, under the impression that this is the way to please Him. Mark the difference between religious right and wrong as God teaches it, and as man sometimes teaches it. Shun everything that would make the Christian life artificially strenuous. Remember that you may sin by dullness as well as by vivacity." [10]

When the Israelites persisted in mourning after confession and forgiveness of sins, Ezra rebuked them. "This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not." When the truth of the Scriptures Ezra read sank into their hearts, they "went their way to eat, and to drink . . . and to make great mirth" (Nehemiah 8:9,12).

A hymn penned in the mid-nineteenth century by Edward H. Plumptre, contains these stanzas:

Rejoice ye pure in heart,  
Rejoice, give thanks and sing;  
Your festal banner wave on high,  
The cross of Christ your King.

With all the angel choirs,  
With all the saints on earth,  
Pour out the strains of joy and bliss,  
True rapture, noblest mirth!

Since humor is a gift of God and since God has provided opportunities for us to exercise it, we may someday be called to account for our stewardship of this happy faculty, just as we will be summoned to answer for our talents. Let us not bury our sense of humor.

Why should we suppose that tears are pious and laughs perverse? On the contrary, tears seem more closely allied to sin than laughs, for someday God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. But nowhere does the Bible say God will wipe away our laughs.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 1

- 1 C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 2nd series (London: Marshall Brothers, 1906 p. 118.
- 2 Charles Stanford, *The Wit and Humor of Life* (London: Elliot Stock Publishing Co., 1886), p. 64.
- 3 George A. Turner, "John Wesley as an Interpreter of Scripture", in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, edited by John W. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 167.
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- 8 Hastings, article "Humor" in *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), Vol. 1, p. 761.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 760.
- 10 Stanford, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

## CHAPTER 2

### People Are Funny

A man was visiting a friend's home. Together they were watching a television program. The host's dog also sat in front of the TV set, seemingly enjoying the story. At humorous moments the dog, a Great Dane, would nod knowingly to its master and chuckle. When the program ended the visitor immediately turned to the master, "Why, your dog seemed to enjoy the story and even to like the humor. It amazes me!"

"I'm surprised, too," the master replied, "because he didn't like it a bit when it appeared in book form."

The smile you give this story reveals the absurdity of a dog either reading a book or enjoying humor.

It is people who are funny!

A boy and his dog may become inseparable buddies. They may romp together, sleep together, sometimes eat together, but when it comes to laughter they will be poles apart. When the lad lets out a howl of laughter at something that tickles his sense of humor, the dog will look at his master with a wooden expression. If any thought process could prance behind that blank stare, it would be, "What's wrong with my master? Is he sick?" Only man laughs.

Chapter 1 listed six reasons to show God's approval of humor. This chapter elaborates on reason number one – God created man to enjoy humor.

Because he is made in the image of God, man thinks. His intellectual ability permits him to reason, speak, invent, appreciate the artistic, and create and recognize the comical. By virtue of his position at the apex of God's creation, he is the only one of the created beings that laughs. Had not man been created in divine likeness, Walpole could never have made the observation that "the world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those who feel". One divine gave this counsel, "If thou beest wise, laugh: for since the powers of discourse, and Reason, and laughter, be equally proper unto Man only, why shall not he be only most wise, as well as he which hath most of reasoning and discoursing." [1]

Just as every individual possesses an IQ, however widely it may vary, so every person has what we may call an HQ (Humor Quotient), ranging from high to low. Though he may not have the ability to actively create humor in abundance, man has the capacity to enjoy it in measure. Laughter is human. Because a person never laughs doesn't mean he is super-spiritual. Rather, it may mean he is sub-human, perhaps to be pitied like the man with the low IQ. In fact, tests have indicated that a lively sense of humor goes hand-in-hand with high intelligence. Research has revealed that generally students who ranked high scholastically were not the most serious or sober-minded but those who possessed a better sense of humor than the poorer students who tended to laugh indiscriminately. One psychologist suggested that sense of humor tests could almost be substituted for intelligence tests. Humor is directly related to rationality which is a major element in man's creation in the divine image.

### PEOPLE WERE FUNNY – IN ALL TIMES

The history of humor is simply the history of humanity's literature. As far back as the literary record goes, so does humor. Philosophers from ancient to modern eras have had something to say about humor, including Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson.

The most widely held theory of humor traces its origin back to the coarse shout of a hairy, sub-human, stone-age savage as he stands in gleeful exultation over a fallen foe after a ferocious battle. In typical evolutionary fashion this hypothesis holds that as humanity slowly developed, this primitive, brutal laugh of triumph gave way to higher forms of humor. Instead of amusement at the disaster of others, man in time reacted with delight at a semblance of disaster, but where no real tragedy existed. In later times this seeming disaster gave way to mere misfit or incongruity, resulting in the quiet chuckle of the humorist. The scale of humor rose through comedy of words, to comedy of ideas, to comedy of situation and character, finally to the comedy of the sublime where pathos and humor blend. Also, in this explanation of the origin of humor, the beginning stream which ultimately gave birth to the humor of the highest type divided in another direction. This divergent flow, retaining some of the original brutality, issued, in modified forms of meanness such as ridicule, satire, sarcasm and scorn. The pun, as a form of humor, on this hypothesis, came late, after the invention of language.

Those who believe in man's original creation in the likeness of God need not postulate this progressive development of humor as outlined above. An ascending scale of humor may exist but it doesn't necessarily follow that the lower forms preceded the higher. The creationist would hold that the

Adam who possessed the advanced intelligence necessary to name the animals also possessed sufficient capacity for higher as well as lower forms of humor from the very beginning.

Any historical outline of humor involves writers of all eras. On an ancient Egyptian papyrus dating earlier than 1,000 B.C. was drawn a cat wielding a shepherd's crook and driving a flock of geese. This was a humorous take-off on tyrants who mistreated their fellow-humans.

According to Josephus, famed Jewish historian, Hiram of Tyre exchanged riddles with other monarchs. Aesop's Fables in the sixth century BC portrayed animals masquerading as humans. Aristotle, Greek philosopher living four centuries BC, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, spoke of ready-wittedness as the proper mean between boorishness and buffoonery. In his *Poetics* Aristotle dealt mainly with tragedy, remarking that comedy was a subdivision of the ugly or tragic. Greek comedy was presented before Athenian audiences with features exaggerated by grotesque masks.

It has been pointed out that Euclid framed many of his propositions in geometry in joke fashion. One condensed example runs, "If two triangles have two angles of each equal to two angles of the other, each to each, then must the third angles be equal each to each. For if not, let one be greater than the other. Then the three angles of one are greater than of the other. But the three angles of each are equal to two right angles. Therefore, two right angles are greater than two right angles – which is absurd!" At this spot Euclid's hearers were supposed to roar with laughter. [2]

Buddhist literature spoke of monkeys who watered their gardens and then pulled up plants to see if their roots were wet. The "noodle" jokes of ancient times related the words and deeds of the witless, such as the fellow who, teaching his horse to eat less and less, gave him nothing. When the horse died, the witless exclaimed, "Just as he was learning to live on nothing, he died!"

The punch-line of some jokes told today dates back hundreds of years, like the following. On the day of woman's creation the gods took the roundness of the moon, the trembling quality of grass, the radiance of light and by mixing with other ingredients made woman. A week later man complained that she talked incessantly and told the gods to take her back. A week later man came begging for her, moaning that without her life was lonely. Three days later man appeared again asking the gods to please take her back. This time they refused, insisting he must keep her. Then he said, "I can't live with her and I can't live without her!" [3]

In the century preceding Christ a writer named Horace wanted to improve conditions. His satirical style of humor is termed Horatian. Another writer named Juvenal wrote scathingly. His type is called Juvenalian. One Roman humorist left over a thousand epigrams.

In the Middle Ages, Dante's most famous work was called *The Comedy*, later known as *Divine Comedy*. The Crusades brought a flood of oriental tales to the west. Court jesters developed repertoires of repartee. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* contain much humor. When printing was invented, joke collections soon appeared which historians tell us provide the foundation for many modern stories. Shakespeare's writings are full of puns. His humor, among other factors, involves the anatomically ludicrous Falstaff character and the confusion caused by mix-up on the identity of twins.

From ancient, through medieval, to modern times, humor has persisted.

## PEOPLE ARE FUNNY – AT ALL AGES

From infancy to old age humor has its attraction. It doesn't take many weeks before a baby smiles, then laughs. If tickled, its diaphragm flutters up and down. A child under two in a playful mood will laugh if you put a glass of water to its lips, then draw it away before it can take a swallow. If you repeat the tease two or three times, the baby's laughter will increase. A child under two will also laugh if when holding it in your arms you suddenly let it drop a few inches, or if you peek at it from one side of an object, then hide your face, then peek out from the other side.

By the time a child goes to school he will laugh at things he sees and hears. He doesn't need to be tickled. Children appreciate humor. A cat walking into a classroom will make children laugh. What early grader fails to be amused on hearing how Puss in Boots convinced the boastful magician to change himself into a mouse and be eaten?

Though development of one's sense of humor is usually omitted from self-improvement programs and college curricula, a course in humor was offered for a while by the University of Florida.

To cater to adult love of laughter most secular magazines devote much space to humor. *Reader's Digest* has carried several anecdotal sections such as "Life in These United States", "Your Slip Is Showing", and "Laughter - the Best Medicine". *The Saturday Evening Post*, famed for its cartoons and "Post Scripts", also has carried a humorous feature called "The Perfect Squelch".

Not only does humor appeal to all ages, but also to both sexes. One battery of tests indicated that men were more easily amused even by not-so-funny stories, but that women were better judges of what was or wasn't humorous.

## PEOPLE ARE FUNNY – IN ALL PLACES

Because humor is human, it is found in all groups round the world. The Chinese have their “Confucius say”, Persian wit is best known to us through *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Most people have heard the Sphinx riddle of Egypt, “What in the morning has four legs, at noon two legs, at evening three legs?” The answer is man, who in the morning of life crawls on all fours, at high noon strides erect on two feet, but at eventide needs a crutch.

The familiar story of the old husband with two wives, the younger of whom plucked out his gray hairs, and the older of whom pulled his black hairs, leaving him bald and pleasing neither wife, appears in the Hebrew Talmud, Chinese joke books, as well as several others. The *Koran* says, “He deserves Paradise who makes his companions laugh.” The Russian people recently appealed for more humor in their TV programs, complaining in letters to their newspapers that their present TV diet was downright boring.

Though all nations have a sense of humor, they do not necessarily laugh at the same things. One nation may find as many things amusing as another nation, yet the things that amuse may vary greatly. We laugh at mother-in-law jokes, whereas peoples whose cultures grant mothers-in-law no authority find such jokes pointless. Though the basis of humor remains the same the world around, variety of environment and national character influence a nation’s humor. The stern Scots have many jokes on death; the romantic French on weddings. Some humor books have sections labeled “Scots jokes”, “Irish jokes”, “African-American jokes”, and so on. It has been said that American literature from Ben Franklin to Mark Twain to Irvin Cobb has a brand of humor mostly its own.

Humor is subjective, as indefinable as beauty, socially conditioned and fragile. Jokes change with the cultural situation. What one generation roared at may draw no reaction from the next generation. If another group doesn’t find our brand of humor amusing it doesn’t mean their sense of humor is inferior to ours. It merely means that they have not been psychologically conditioned to appreciate that particular type of joke. It has been said that if the proper mood were created, a joke could be made on any theme. Often related is Samuel Johnson’s boast that he could spontaneously create a joke on any subject. “The King”, some immediately suggested, thinking they had him, for who would dare joke about royalty? Came Johnson’s quick response, “The King is not a subject”.

Where any nation’s literature is sufficiently abundant, humor in its broadest sense is bound to come out in some form, whether caricatures, mimicry, cartoons, comics, jokes, ridicule, fun, mirth, laughter, puns, jests, riddles, fables, irony, satire or sarcasm.

During a missionary conference at a large church at which every major mission field of the world was represented, an interested listener asked every speaker if the people he worked among had a sense of humor. In every case the answer was in the affirmative. Yes, people are funny everywhere.

## PEOPLE ARE FUNNY – IN UNLIKELY CIRCUMSTANCES

A raven had found its way behind the pulpit of a dignified Scots church. Just as the minister began to preach, the raven croaked out, “Stop yer bletherings; stop yer bletherings.” Though the congregation was composed of staid Scots Christians, the sound of muffled mirth wafted through the church. God has made us to laugh, even in the most unlikely of situations. Once at a concert during the short silence between parts in a Beethoven symphony, someone sneezed. The natural result was laughter, though somewhat suppressed by politeness. You can’t keep laughter out of life. It will seep through consciously or unconsciously.

In a day when Puritan sternness permeated much of English church life, Matthew Henry’s famous commentary radiated gems of genuine wit. Commenting on the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam, he wrote rather beautifully but with the sparkle of wit, “Woman was taken from man’s side, not from his head to rule over him, nor from his feet to be trodden down by him, but from beneath his shoulder to be protected by him and from next to his heart to be loved by him.”

Despite the gloom and chill melancholy of Puritan life in early America, when everything that savored of brightness, cheerfulness and frivolity was frowned on, Puritan life was far from being devoid of humor. Flashes of wit pierced the sternness more often than is usually thought. The New England Puritans were not as gloomy as sometimes made out to be.

The charge has been made that the travelers on the *Mayflower* would have made unbearable company. It is forgotten that among the group was a man who in his younger days was a trusted friend of Queen Elizabeth’s Secretary of State, also a “writer whose later *History of Plymouth Plantation* evidenced strokes of pathos and humor which would have captivated any audience, and others with great strength of character, so that the Atlantic crossing need not to have been dull by any means.” [4]

Governor John Winthrop (1588-1649), writing in his *Journal* about the scarcity of servants because of war back in England, and about the scarcity of money to pay servants, relates this humorous incident. A master, “forced to sell a pair of his oxen to pay his servant his wages, told his servant he

could keep him no longer, not knowing how to pay him the next year. The servant answered he would serve him for more of his cattle. 'But how shall I do,' saith the master, 'when all my cattle are gone?' The servant replied, 'You shall then serve me, and so you may have your cattle again.'" [5]

Nathaniel Ward, Puritan preacher who died in 1652, possessed exuberance which permitted him to speak "merrily" yet "seriously". In his essay *On Women's Fashions* he asked, "What prohibits speaking truth with a smile?" [6] He spoke of woman's "loose-tongued liberty . . . and their long-waisted but short-skirted patience". [6] He likened their outlandish dress to "Egyptian hieroglyphics". [6]

When Puritan minister John Wise attacked Cotton Mather's proposal to give ministerial associations power over the selection of ministers, he used the vehicle of a humorous sketch written in 1710, *The Churches' Quarrel Espoused*. Another preacher on hearing Mather speak said, "Call him 'Matter', for this man hath substance in him."

Samuel Sewall (1652-1730), the judge who repented of his part in the court that hanged some witches, left a diary containing the account of his courtship of the widow Madame Winthrop. The modern reader will enjoy many a laugh at the expense of this Puritan who though oblivious to some of the humor therein must have often been conscious of the ridiculous figure he cut.

The poetry of Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) shows that a Puritan could combine piety, love of children and humor. [7]

Harriet Beecher Stowe once said, "If the Puritans considered humor wrong, then they had a lot to answer for." Because humor often broke out through their shell of sobriety, many have found it difficult to reconcile the two facets of Puritan life. The contradictory moods of Puritan earnestness and Yankee comedy are interwoven through all the novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe. One authority claims it was not un-Puritan to combine these two moods. Rather, it was consistent "with the practice of many dyed-in-the-wool New England Calvinists. . . . The New England mind recognized that not only the good life must be lived under tension but also that 'It Spoils the Bow to keep it always bent.'" [8]

The same author spends an entire chapter on this duality of Puritan earnestness and Yankee comedy under the title of "New England Doubleness". He reasons thus, "The alternating of seriousness with humor is, of course, nearly a universal trait and may be found over and over again in literature. We find it in Shakespeare, in Scott, in Dickens, to name obvious examples . . . But if we cannot mark off precisely the local from the universal in this matter and declare with finality that this belongs to New England and that to the world, still there seems grounds for making local practice particular by calling it New England doubleness." [9]

Many stories are told about the eccentricity of the absentminded scholar, Dr. John Duncan, Professor of Hebrew and Oriental languages in New College, Edinburgh, from 1843 to 1870. An extraordinary man, he was learned in several fields, gifted as a talker and profound in his thinking. One midnight he was walking the streets of Edinburgh, talking to himself, talking theology, talking philosophy, talking poetry, talking all the time. Then he began to talk on the theology of St. Augustine. He confessed to himself that he was afraid that Augustine never would have passed a Presbyterian examination. When the odd fancy seized him of Augustine under examination before the Scotch theologians, he broke into peals of uncontrollable laughter. A near-by policeman looked dubiously in his direction as if debating whether it was his duty to lock Duncan up as a vagrant.

Humor is just plain human!

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 2

- 1 John Donne, *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1952), p. 286.
- 2 Stephen Leacock, *Humor and Humanity* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1938), p. 199. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.
- 3 Carolyn Wells, ed., *An Outline of Humor* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1923 copyright renewed 1951), p. 124. Used by permission.
- 4 John Brown, *The Pilgrim Fathers of New England* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1920), pp. 338, 339.
- 5 Perry Miller, ed., *The American Puritans, Their Prose and Poetry* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 45.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p 266
- 8 Charles H. Foster, *The Rungless Ladder* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1954), p. 8.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

## CHAPTER 3

### Why We Laugh

No one knows why we emit that particular noise called laughter. Nor is it fully known why certain things are funny. Doubtless, some laughs serve as psychological bluffs to hide loneliness, sorrow or embarrassment. Certain laughs are physiologically caused by a damaged nervous system resulting in convulsions and paroxysms of giggles; hence the rare disease which reached near-epidemic proportions in New Guinea in 1959 has been named “laughing sickness”. But when we do enjoy something humorous, what makes us roar with laughter or even smile mildly?

Most people would have a difficult time defining humor. Though we can create and enjoy it, we cannot say with precision what it is. A full solution to the problem of what makes a person laugh may be impossible because humor proves to be an elusive subject. Laughter seems to laugh at our attempts at definition. Some try to distinguish between the comical, nonsensical, ridiculous, funny and absurd, but these terms seem to shift into each other with elasticity of meaning to defy classification. In these pages humor will be used synonymously with these terms without subtle distinctions of significance.

To compound the difficulty, humor is extremely subjective. What may be humorous to one person may evoke no smile from another. That which amuses one person may not be funny to the object of the joke. What may not have been a bit humorous to the immediate circle originally involved may draw roars of laughter from readers or hearers outside their circle. That which does not seem funny at the moment may prove hilarious on later reflection. This is why James Thurber explains humor as “emotional chaos remembered in tranquility”.

Despite the difficulty of defining humor, certain basic factors consistently inhere in most or all humor: *incongruity*, *superiority*, *kindliness* and *unexpectedness*.

This chapter continues within the framework of the proposition stated in the first two chapters – that God created man to enjoy humor. Specifically, this chapter explores the factors that make man laugh. Understanding of the elements that trigger laughter will provide valuable background for later chapters on humor in the Bible, humor in the words of Christ and the reasons God laughs.

#### INCONGRUITY

An early definition of humor is found in Aristotle who calls it the ridiculous or incongruous. Two seniors walked down the corridor of a college building. One, over six feet tall, wore a derby. His roommate, quite short, wore a fedora. No one laughed. Then they exchanged hats so that the little fedora was perched atop the six-footer’s head and the derby dropped down over the ears of the short fellow. Everyone laughed.

Henri Bergson defines humor as “something mechanical encrusted on the living”. [1] His illustration of a speaker’s mechanical gestures which do not fit the changing spirit of his message is in reality disparity between what is and what ought to be, a lapse from congruity. Professionalism is in constant danger of acting mechanical. This is why we laugh at the following absent-mindedness:

A preacher stood at the door after service shaking hands and unthinkingly repeating after every parishioner’s remark, “That’s good!”

Even when a lady said, “My husband is in the hospital seriously ill,” he sweetly nodded, “That’s good!”

Wherever two items are placed in juxtaposition when they ought not to be so related, we have something funny such as a cardinal on a monkey’s head, valuable Christmas presents wrapped in newspaper, a tall man sitting on a short donkey with the rider’s legs almost touching the ground, or a minister’s wife’s new flower-like hat momentarily placed on the back seat of the undertaker’s car suddenly being lowered into the grave with all of the other floral pieces. At the final rehearsal for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II an incongruous episode occurred at a dramatic moment. The orchestra’s final strains had sounded, the archbishop stood by the altar, and nearby were the officials of state. Then sounded the spine-tingling fanfare of trumpets. The Queen was about to enter. Suddenly onto this awesome scene pranced four charwomen, maids in white overalls, waving four carpet sweepers. Suddenly the vast assembly at the rehearsal laughed long and hard and with no disrespect for the splendid pageantry of royalty.

Another story illustrates incongruity:

A preacher in the habit of exaggerating his illustrations said to his wife on their way to church, “If I start exaggerating tonight, please make a sign and I’ll stop.”

In the sermon he began to tell about a big church he had visited as a boy. "It was 600 feet long," he explained, "300 feet wide, and . . ."

Just then his wife gave him the sign. So he meekly ended his description, "Of course, it was just six inches high."

If wisdom involves the recognition of harmonies, similarities or congruities, wit involves the recognition of disharmonies, dissimilarities and incongruities. Thus, wit and wisdom are closely related. Those who most readily recognize harmonies in the various spheres of life should be most apt to see inconsistencies. He who is wise should be witty.

The incongruity of two opposites shows up in this anecdote:

A Baptist was comparing her church with several other churches. "When it comes to dignity, we can't be compared to the Episcopalians," she said. "As for ritual, the Lutherans have it all over us, and in regard to singing the Nazarenes have us beat."

Then she added, "But when it comes to humility, we're tops!"

## SUPERIORITY

When others blunder or suffer some misadventure, we feel momentary superiority since we're not in the same plight. The enjoyment of another's mistake feeds our vanity. We say to ourselves, "How stupid can people be! I'm not that dumb!" A feeling of eminence arises within ourselves. This explanation of humor is sometimes called the derision theory. This is why when successful in pulling an April Fool's Day prank on someone we think, "Ha-ha, I've put one over on you!" We are amused when someone falls as a chair is yanked from under him or in slapstick buffoonery someone is smacked in the face with a pie. This explains why we smile at the bright remarks of little children. They are naive; we adults are smarter. Ability to make a quick repartee makes us react within, "My, but I'm clever." When one person in a group doesn't catch on to a joke we laugh at him because we feel superior.

Thomas Hobbes said, "Laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the inferiority of others or with our own formerly." Plato said that we laugh at the misfortunes of others for joy that we do not share them.

Riddles operate on the superiority factor. Someone asks, "What has eight ears and sings?" If his hearer cannot answer, the first person gleefully replies, "A quartet!" If the hearer happens to win the duel of wits by giving the correct answer, he can laugh at the questioner.

Laughter may be directed against those in authority. In every oppressed country there are "dictator" jokes, which, when related on the sly, release pent-up resentment against tyrannical leadership. Humor may be an indirect way of flouting authority, such as stories in which the college dean or president is made the butt of the joke. An oft-told story around Moody Bible Institute both during and following the days when Dr. James Gray was president, ran like this:

One evening a student heard a knock at his door. "Who's there?" he called.

"It's Dr. Gray."

"Go on, you can't kid me!"

"It's me. Dr. Gray."

"If you were Dr. Gray, you wouldn't say, 'It's me'. You'd say, 'It's I.'"

When the student opened the door, there stood Dr. Gray.

Doubtless this story has been told on many a campus, substituting the name of that particular college president in place of Dr. Gray. Naturally, such tales go over much better with a college audience than with non-college groups. Most people enjoy laughing at the expense of authoritative figures because it tends to reduce them to every man's level. These figures are not necessarily disliked, but laughter provides the only acceptable way for the underdog to vent his feelings against authority. Sergeants, generals, congressmen, pompous executives, wardens, absent-minded professors and policemen have all been targets for humor.

The following story strikes at the clergyman-figure, partly at his employer-role.

A preacher who ran a farm as well as pastoring a small church in Vermont, was noted for his tight-fistedness. One day he spotted the hired help sitting down by his plow while the horse took a deserved rest. His sense of economy outraged, for he was paying the young man fifty cents an hour, he said, "Wouldn't it be a good idea for you to carry a pair of shears with you so you could be trimming those bushes while the horses rest?"

"And could I make a suggestion, sir?" the young man countered. "Wouldn't it be a good idea for you to take a bag of potatoes into the pulpit and peel them while the choir sings its anthem?"

The know-it-all graduate is brought down a peg or two:

A young man who had graduated from college and seminary said, "Now I've arrived. I have my A.B. degree, also my B.D."

A wise man who overheard said "Take it easy. You still have to learn the rest of the alphabet!"

Infidels, agnostics and atheists have been reduced to proper proportions by many a story.

An atheist sat on a bridge, strenuously lecturing a group of boys on the theme, "God does not exist." In his enthusiasm he lost his balance and fell into the river. He screamed, "God, help me!" After the boys fished him out, he started to resume his lecture. The boys would not listen.

## KINDLINESS

Humor has been defined as "the contemplation of the incongruities of life". This definition should be amended to read "kindly contemplation". It has also been described as the superiority felt at the misfortune of others. This observation should be qualified. The discomfiture another suffers which makes us laugh must be mild, else the misadventure passes from comedy to tragedy. Often we say, "If it weren't so tragic, it would be funny." Seeing a man slip on a banana peel is funny provided the person doesn't injure himself. It is amusing to see a man bashed in the face with a pie, but it is another matter when a brick hits him on the head. Enjoyment of another's sufferings, either in the ancient cruelty of the Roman arena or in modern rough horseplay, is not humor but sadism. The kindness of humor demands mildness in the misfortunes we laugh at.

Though in his *Poetics* Aristotle deals mainly with tragedy, he does point out that what is laughable is merely a subdivision of what is ugly involving some defect that is not connected with pain or injury. In other words, kindness is an essential element in humor. A comedy may present quaint situations with lightness of dialogue, but its main feature is its happy ending. Sometimes the term *comedy* is applied to serious works whose purpose is to portray truth without leaving a painful or tragic impression. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, though dealing with the serious theme of life after death, has a pleasant ending that distinguishes it from the genre of tragedy.

Purity of humor seems to vary inversely with the amount of discomfiture suffered by the victim. The more the pain, the less the quality of the joke, unless the pain is inflicted in love for the victim's ultimate welfare. The highest form of the derision-type fun would be jokes on ourselves. Others gain a sense of superiority at our expense. No one gets hurt as pain is reduced to a minimum, as in the following:

A preacher confessed to periodic bouts of insomnia, then added, "But I have a sure-fire remedy for the sleepless nights. When I wake up in the night and can't get back to sleep, I go over some of my sermons in my mind. And to my delight, I find that my sermons have the same effect on me that they had on some members of my congregation." [2]

One would not expect to find humor in the well-known *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, a voluminous, detailed record of the final cruelties and sufferings inflicted on those who died for the faith during the first fifteen centuries of the Christian era. Yet Fox entitled one episode, "Merrie and pleasant narration touching a false and fearful imagination of fire raised in Saint Marie's church at Oxford at the recantation of Master Malory." A false-alarm cry of fire from outside the church caused a humorous stampede within. Noted divines and scholars ridiculously scurried about seeking holes and corners to hide in, gasping for breath in the dust kicked up by those struggling to get out the door. One divine knelt before the high altar and committed his life to the sacrament. The president of a college pulled a board out of a pew, holding it over his head and shoulders to protect himself against the imaginary scalding lead. Another thrust his head and shoulder through an iron grating but became stuck between the grates, unable to get in or out. Fox chuckled through four folio columns of humor. What makes this story "merrie and pleasant" instead of tragic is its kindness – no one was injured.

Will Rogers, noted humorist, once said, "I have joked about everybody, but I never met a man in my life that I did not like." This kind approach to others helps explain the success of his humor.

When self-exaltation comes through derision of others, humor has degenerated into wrong usage. Satire, scorn and sarcasm all branch from the trunk of derision. Satire, the elaborate holding up for public viewing of some folly to ridicule, can be carried to cruel extremes. Scorn and sarcasm radiate bitterness. Their ill-natured, cutting edges remove them in most cases from the realm of kindness. Yet, just as anger at times may seem sinless, so sarcasm on occasions may be righteous. "Evil has its ludicrous side, and the exhibition of this is sometimes more effective than plain argument. Irony, however, is a dangerous weapon, and needs to be handled with skill. The anger that pours ridicule upon an opponent must have behind it a heart of love, if its wounds are to prove wholesome . . . Paul's satire is always akin to charity; it is never satire with no pity in it." [3]

A famous philosopher recognized that lack of kindness made humor unhumorous: "Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called Laughter; and is caused . . . by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves . . . Those who are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves are forced to keep themselves in their own favor, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore, much Laughter at the defects of others is a sign of Pusillanimity. For of the great minds, one of the proper works is to help free others from scorn, and compare themselves only with the most able." [4]

## UNEXPECTEDNESS

At a performance of *La Traviata*, Violetta was singing her beautiful swan song. As she paused before the last notes, in that sweetly sad, silent moment, the trumpeter in the pit dropped his trumpet. People laughed.

Herbert Spencer, in his *Physiology of Laughter*, argues that a sense of the incongruous caused by certain unexpected contrasts will be followed by an involuntary contradiction of certain facial muscles. The philosopher Kant defined the ludicrous as "an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation to nothing". Not only is incongruity involved, but suddenness or surprise. The unexpected remark at the end of the following story usually causes laughter.

Out in the Canadian prairies a preacher received his pay in the form of offerings placed in a box at the back of the church. Consequently he didn't get any remuneration on blizzard Sundays. For three full weeks he was snowbound. Because there had been no church his money and food supplies dwindled perilously low. On the third Monday he saw someone shoving through the snow toward the parsonage. "At last someone is coming to help me," he sighed.

When he saw it was the church treasurer, his courage increased. "The church hasn't forgotten me".

At first knock the starving minister opened the door, and warmly welcomed his guest. Then the treasurer stated his business. "I just came to find out the address of the Old-Fashioned Revival Hour. I've been blessed by their broadcasts the last few Sundays, and I just wanted to send them a few dollars for their radio work."

A joke often leads a listener's train of thought in one direction, then suddenly lands it in another, like this pastor's comment:

"When I came to this church, I didn't have a book. Now I have one."

Because this remark catches us off guard, it evokes laughter. We laugh because we are fooled. This has been called the disappointment or frustrated experience theory. Mild shock is an important element in the emotional seizure known as humor. Why babies laugh seems not always explicable on the previous theories of laughter - incongruity, superiority, kind derision - but is understandable on the frustrated expectation hypothesis. Babies under a year in a playful mood, when swung toward their mother's arms then suddenly before arrival are jerked back, will laugh heartily. Music without title can raise gales of laughter by unexpected contrasts of notes. The unexpected plays a role in practically every piece of humor, including stories told by the missionaries.

A missionary was caught by cannibals. A big, boiling pot began to steam not far away. "Going to eat me?" asked the missionary. "Why don't you taste me to see if you'll like me?" he suggested. "I don't think you'll want me!"

Whereupon he sliced a piece from the calf of his leg and gave it to the chief, who took one bite, and said "ugh" and almost choked.

The missionary worked on that island for thirty years. He had a cork leg.

Another story about a missionary on deputation work fits in the "unexpected" formula.

A missionary gave an impassioned plea for young people to consider service on the mission field when they grew up. After the service a small boy asked to see him.

"I think I can guess why you wish to see me. You want to be a missionary when you grow up, don't you?"

"Oh, no, sir," answered the boy, "I just wondered if you had any foreign stamps you could give me." (Reprinted from *Coronet*, July, 1958)

This story also protests against superior self-opinions of our own abilities.

## AREAS OF HUMOR

So much for the elements of humor. Now we turn to the areas in which humor operates. According to one analyst, humor may be connected with words, with ideas, with situation and character, and even with the vanity and pathos of life. [5]

### ***Humor Involving Words***

Because it is a verbal device, the pun, which was the chief form of wit in England for a few generations and which saturates the writings of Shakespeare, has been called the lowest form of wit. The same sound with different meanings brings into relationship two things that have nothing to do with each other. Based on incongruity, puns also involve superiority over the pretentious solemnity of words, showing one's ability to shove them around and thus elicit response. Some examples:

"Marriage is love *parsonified*."

The girls sat near the front of church so they could more easily pick out their *hymns*.

In progressive education you learn to do by *Deweying*.

Two little boys were playing. One asked the other, "Why don't you go to church?"

"I don't know. I'll ask my mother tonight."

Next day he had the answer. "Mother says we belong to a different *abomination!*"

A woman entered the bank with an envelope full of securities. When the manager saw what she had he said, "Do you want to *convert* them or *redeem* them?"

A little confused she asked, "Say, what is this – the Bank of England or the Church of England?"

Three ministers in northern Indiana were discussing their problems because three railroads converged in their town. One said, "My church is too close to the New York Central. When the long freight comes crashing through during my service every Sunday morning, it's difficult for the congregation to hear the preaching."

A second minister explained, "My church is so close to the Pennsylvania tracks that when the big diesel with its long passenger train comes whistling through, we can't hear the choir singing."

The third minister complained, "My trouble is the *Nickel Plate*. It comes right down my middle aisle at offering time every Sunday morning".

A Presbyterian minister, surprised when three Episcopalian vestrymen he had met on the golf course walked into church, whispered to an usher, "Get three chairs for the Episcopalians." The usher didn't quite understand, so the pastor repeated, "Give three chairs to the Episcopalians."

The usher, a little puzzled, stepped to the front, and in pep-leader stance yelled to an amazed congregation, "Ready, everybody! All together! Let's give three cheers for the Episcopalians."

Samuel Johnson regarded the pun as a kind of verbal device and the meanest member of the humor family. But puns are just one form of humor based on words. Medieval scholars amused themselves with anagrams and acrostics. Alliteration is another method of playing with words, as are crossword puzzles, literalization and incorrect spelling. The sign on the summer cottage at the Bible camp, *Dew Drop Inn*, comes under this category. Here's an example of literalization:

*Question:* Where can happiness always be found? *Answer:* In the dictionary.

The transposition of the initial sounds of two words, known as spoonerism, has provided many a laugh. The little girl, excited over the good times she had had at her friend's, exclaimed that for dinner the vegetables were "parrots and keys". Amusing is the question of the mixed-up usher:

Marden me, Padam, Your pie is occupewed! May I sew you to another sheet?

When we say things by a slip of the tongue that we have been thinking but didn't want to express, this is called, after the Austrian psychoanalyst, a Freudian fumble.

A little girl had been warned not to say anything about the new minister's big nose. He was coming for dinner. When the bell rang, she opened the door. "Oh, how do you do, Mr. Nose!"

Wit has been termed an expression of humor involving an unexpected, clever play on words or ideas. Humor is the wider and more kindly term, whereas the narrower wit is sharper and apt to wound, as the following repartee shows:

"My talent is to speak my mind," said a hotheaded woman to John Wesley.

"Woman, God wouldn't care a bit if you would bury that talent!" replied Mr. Wesley.

Someone has said, "Wit is a flash; humor a glow". Another has defined wit as "the luster resulting from the quick elucidation of one subject, by a just and unexpected arrangement of it with another subject." [6]

### ***Humor Involving Ideas***

A missionary noticed that a baby elephant's tusks seemed to get in the way of its trunk. Next time the missionary saw the elephant, its owners had tied its tusks back so as not to interfere with its trunk. On his next furlough he described the young elephant as having braces on its teeth.

Similes and metaphors often contain comparisons which see likeness in unlike things. One preacher spoke of people who in place of backbone have wet spaghetti. This juxtaposition of ideas makes for humor like the English proverb, "He who swells in prosperity will shrink in adversity." Someone has described man as "rooster-drunk when he parades proudly, or monkey-drunk when he capers foolishly, or pig-drunk when he wallows filthily, or lion-drunk when he roars courageously."

The humor of contrasted ideas may take the form of parody, travesty, mimicry, hyperbole or caricature. Parody is taking a well-known song, poem or story and making up other words that don't fit as well. A parody amuses by its leap from the familiar to the unexpected. Who hasn't heard a take-off on "The boy stood on the burning deck"? At a Christian college senior banquet an ornery fellow sent a note to a lovely, bashful girl to sing a solo. Irritated by his constant needling, she sang to the tune of "If I had the wings of an angel," the following words, dedicating them to the young man who made the request,

If I had the ears of a donkey,  
The tail of a kangaroo,  
The face of an English bulldog,  
I'd look exactly like you.

Also at a Christian college a senior with modest piano ability gave an hour's mock piano recital, keeping the audience in stitches for the entire performance. The noted conductor, Leonard Bernstein, gave a lecture over a TV network on the humor of music, illustrating, with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra playing, how composers handle satire and parody.

Mimicry imitates another's habits, gestures or speech. How often at faculty night in college some daring and talented senior mimics the idiosyncrasies of a dignified professor to the howling delight of both students and faculty. One evening when the seniors of the King's College were gathered for refreshments in the home of their president, Dr. Percy Crawford, nationally-known youth evangelist and radio and TV speaker, one enterprising fellow undertook to "take off" Dr. Crawford's staccato, incisive, twangy delivery. His act was interrupted by spasms of laughter.

Exaggeration may cause laughter. In this story it is combined with literalization.

Known to be the worst gossip in the community, a lady came up to a church altar at the end of a service and said to the pastor, "I'd like to lay my tongue on the altar."

He looked at her, then replied, "I'd like to help you but the altar is only fifteen feet long."

The following anecdote contains two incongruous exaggerations.

Boy: "I saw a giraffe with a neck a mile long!"

Mother: "Haven't I told you a million times not to exaggerate?"

One element in humor is delight in seeing some authority taken down a peg or two. This sense of delight at seeing something knocked out of shape leads to caricature, which is a distortion that produces a ridiculous effect, such as a broken umbrella with its ribs sticking out of the cloth, or a clown with a mouth too big. One set of cartoons showed a car with its front grill giving way to a jaw with both upper and lower teeth, and another car with its trunk turned into a custom jewel box for fussy thieves.

Understatement, as well as overstatement, may yield humor.

To hide the shameful fact that his father had been hanged for cattle stealing, a lawyer rewrote his own family history thus: "Father died while taking part in a public ceremony when the platform gave way."

Discovering her uncle had died in the electric chair, a New England aristocrat told her fine friends, "Great Uncle Ezekiel occupied the chair of applied electricity in one of the great institutions of this country. He died in harness".

Irony is another form of humor involving ideas. Its distinguishing quality is that the intended implication of what is said is just the opposite from the literal sense of the words. One says one thing and means the opposite. Sarcasm is usually more brutal than irony. In his speech over Caesar's body Anthony several times referred to the "honorable men" whose daggers stabbed Caesar. He really meant they were dishonorable. A preacher unthinkingly preceded his wife through the door of a parishioner's home. "Well, you are a gentleman," she commented, meaning just the reverse.

### ***Humor Involving Situation and Character***

A clergyman had been invited to attend a party of the Sunday school nursery department. He decided to surprise them, so getting on his hands and knees, flapping his coat tails over his head like wings, he hopped in on all fours, cackling like a bird. Imagine his surprise when he learned that due to a switch in locations, he had intruded on the ladies' missionary meeting.

An area of humor higher than that of words and ideas stems from incongruities of personal adventure and queer personalities more commonly called situation and character. The confusion arising out of mistaken identities of twins in Shakespeare's plays illustrates situation humor. Modern church life presents many opportunities for such humor.

Because of overflow congregations a pastor was forced to hold two identical morning services. One Sunday he noticed a parishioner arrive very late during the nine-thirty service. To his surprise the parishioner was in his seat when the eleven o'clock service began. But when the congregation rose to sing the hymn before the sermon, he left, explaining to the usher, "This is where I came in." [7]

A cartoon showed a morning service on the day that daylight saving started. Near the end of the sermon the rector paused to say, "We'll wait just a minute while those among us who failed to remember to put their clocks forward are comfortably seated." The late-comers shamefully dropped into their seats while those present gave them a sleepy but self-righteous glance.

Humor of character deals with people who when analyzed present inconsistencies that do not conflict with reality but are most possible, such as the timid Mr. Milquetoast.

The humor that seems to reach the heights of sublimity is that which interweaves with the pathos of life. In the ancient Greek tragedy there was need for relief from the sustained gravity. So to provide amusement against the horror, and laughter against tears, out came the comic figure. It is difficult to take tragedy straight and continuous; it needs dilution with humor. How often the elements of pathos and humor interweave.

An old Chinaman was eating too much rice, especially since he was too frail to work. Because the grandfather had become a burden, the father of the home, his son, determined to get rid of him. He put him in a wheelbarrow, then started up the mountain. The little nine-year-old grandson went along. He was full of questions. His father explained that the grandfather was old and useless and the only thing they could do was to take him up the mountain and leave him to die. Then the grandson had a bright idea. "I'm glad you brought me along, Father, because when you're old, I'll know where to take you!"

The tragedy need not be of an extreme nature, though perhaps looming large in the mind of the sufferer.

A troop of Boy Scouts had just arrived at camp. Making rather quick inspection, the director found a large umbrella hidden in the bedroll of a small scouter. This item had not been listed for equipment, required or optional. When sternly asked by the director to give an account of how the umbrella got there, the tenderfoot deftly asked, "Sir, did you ever have a mother?"

Few people fail to appreciate the blending of humor and pathos in the following anecdote.

A little boy removed from London during the days of the blitz was going to bed his first night away from home. He prayed, "Now I lay me down to sleep." Then he added, "And God, please take care of Mummy and Daddy. And please, God, take good care of Yourself, because if anything happens to You, we're sunk."

Made in the image of a rational God, humans can enjoy the incongruous whether in words, ideas or situations.

### **NOTES ON CHAPTER 3**

1 Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1956) p. 84.

2 Rev. R. B. Fisher, "Tales Out of Church," used by permission of *The Reader's Digest*, April, 1958.

3 *The Pulpit Commentary*, 1 Corinthians" (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1944), pp. 155, 134.

4 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: E. P. Dutton Co., Everyman's Library, 1950), pp. 45 46.

5 Leacock, *op. cit.*

6 Morris Corbyn, *An Essay Fixing the True Standards Of Wit* (London: publisher, 1744), P. 1.

7 Rev. Charles F. Rehfus, "Tales out of church," used by permission of *The Reader's Digest*, April, 1958

## CHAPTER 4

### Divine Prescription: Merry Medicine

A doctor said, "If you can't take a joke, you'll have to take medicine". He was commenting on the Bible verse, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine" (Proverbs 17:22). Another doctor observed that cheerful people resist disease better than glum folk. He added in parody, "The surly bird catches the germ." The Creek poet, Pindar, said, "The best of healers is good cheer."

Among its medicinal qualities, humor refreshes one, reflects the truth and relaxes others.

#### HUMOR REFRESHES

Jealousy, hostility and irritability produce ill effects by throwing into the body abnormally stimulated hormones from the adrenal and pituitary glands. On the other hand, a good laugh is better than a tonic. A laugh means that large supplies of oxygen are inhaled. Unused muscles are exercised. A general feeling of well-being buoys your spirit. One specialist made his ulcer patients clip side-splitting jokes to read aloud at the table.

Josh Billings said, "Anatomically considered, laughing is a sensation of feeling good all over and showing it principally in one spot. If a man cannot laugh there is some mistake made in putting him together, and if he will not laugh he wants as much keeping away from as a bear-trap when it is set. Genuine laughing is a vent of the soul, the nostrils of the heart, and it is just as necessary for health and happiness as spring water is for a trout." A sincere smile sparks the eyes, ennobles the face, and removes wrinkles. It takes fewer muscles to smile than to frown. A short smile raises one's spirits within a few seconds. The Latin verb *ridere* means to smile as well as to laugh. Is not a smile a miniature laugh?

To help people live closer to the century mark, one medical committee on aging recommended a ten-point program, one of which was – cultivate a sense of humor. "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance . . . he that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast" (Proverbs 15:13,15).

Two classes of people are unqualified for the business of life: those who make life one vast jest, and those who are perpetually long-faced. The latter class, unable to recognize that some annoyances in life are so small that they can be faced with a smile, fail to perceive the due proportion of circumstances. Since to be genuinely serious one must at times be light-hearted, the continuously sad do not face life properly. It was said of James Russell Lowell that lighthearted jest and nonsense were sprinkled plentifully through his long life so filled with hard work and solid achievement.

The man who slaves at some physical task all day needs some physical diversion. Similarly, the person whose mind is burdened with the seriousness of life from morning till night requires mental recreation. One means God has provided for refreshing the mind is humor. Humorous words are not necessarily idle words any more than some serious words. Idle words are those without a purpose. Since the purpose of words is to carry on the business of life, edify others and refresh the mind, any word designed to bring relief from the long-continued and monotonous pressures of life is not idle.

Taking every little disappointment and petty grievance too seriously can tie us up in emotional knots. Seeing the funny side of some trouble may rescue us from unbalanced tenseness and hysteria, keep us sane and help laugh the trouble away. Someone has quipped, "He who laughs – lasts." A mother hung out her washing, but when nearly dry, the line broke. She did the washing again, this time spreading it on the grass to dry. But a dog with muddy feet came along, frolicking on the clean white clothes. Instead of fretfully losing her temper she sighed, "Ain't it queer he didn't miss nothin'?" Somehow fortified in spirit, she proceeded to do the wash for the third time.

A Christian magazine for youth suggested to its prospective writers that humor has a useful place in most articles. By laughing with others and at other's problems the reader can learn to laugh at himself and at his own problems. He can learn not to let his problems get him down. Humor can "untense" the intense.

Humor provides a safety valve to allow pressure to escape so we don't blow up, and for repressed aggressions to break through. A preacher's diary contained this sentence, "Mother used to say that, next to old-fashioned salvation, a sense of humor was the most important thing to take on through this world." Though most people know about the prodigious labors of David Livingstone in opening up Africa for missionary endeavor, few know that in the midst of their lonely life, he and his devoted wife often acted like jolly school kids on an excursion. Mirth saturated their lives so much that Livingstone more than once said to his wife, "Really, my dear, we ought not to indulge in so many jokes. We are getting too old. It is not becoming. We must be more staid."

One missionary suggested that folks on the home front sometimes pray for a saving sense of humor for the missionaries on the field. They must guard against becoming unbalanced. In the midst of terrible sin they must maintain a healthy outlook. To keep from becoming morbid they need to have a good laugh once in a while, perhaps at themselves. [1]

A certain king of Egypt was criticized for levity. "Listen," he replied. "When an archer goes into battle he strings his bow until it is taut. When the shooting is over, he unstrings it again. If he didn't unstring it, it would lose its snap, and it would be no good to him when he needed it." [2] His reign was reported to have been very prosperous. A flash of humor unstrings your bow for a few minutes, thus giving it more snap when needed. A Puritan preacher, Benjamin Colman, pastor of Brattle Street Church in Boston, put it the same way when he wrote in *The Government and Improvement of Mirth*, 1707, "It spoils the Bow to keep it always bent, and the Viol if always strain'd up. Mirth is some loose or relaxation to the laboring Mind or Body; it lifts up the hands that hang down in weariness, and strengthens the feeble knees that could stand no longer to work; it renews our strength, and we resume our labors again with vigor." [3]

In our hectic age few prescriptions on our druggists' shelves are as inexpensive and as potent as the wonder drug of laughter.

A senator said to President Harry Truman after he had left the White House, "I'm glad the president hasn't lost his sense of humor." Truman replied, "Any man who has had the job I've had, and didn't have a sense of humor, wouldn't still be here." An earlier president, Abraham Lincoln, used humor to ease his heartaches during the strain of crisis days. Though pictured as a melancholy figure, he was charged with undue levity in office and called the chief joker of the land. An often-repeated story tells how on a September morning in 1862 he called his cabinet in special session to the White House. Before getting to the serious business at hand, he read them some humorous excerpts from a book written by a wandering minstrel named Artemus Ward. Some didn't appreciate the slapstick, showing so in their unresponsive faces. Lincoln said, "Gentlemen, why don't you laugh? If I didn't laugh with the strain that is on me day and night, I should go mad. And you need the medicine as much as I do." Those who knew Lincoln said laughter was his lifesaver.

Ben Franklin, probably the first American to be recognized as a true humorist, found relief from pressure of responsibility through mirth. It has been suggested that the reason he wasn't invited to write the Declaration of Independence was because he was too fond of a joke. The world's wisest men have mingled the comic with earnestness. So have the world's holiest men.

Contrary to much Christian opinion, our great spiritual leaders did not have faces long enough to lick spaghetti out of the bottom of a barrel. Wells of merriment sprang up to lighten their leisure hours. John Calvin had a fine sense of humor, made good puns and laughed with his friends. Who can rival the playful sallies which dot the writings of the poet Cowper? Who can sound the depths of spiritual truths found in his hymns? Gleams of humor shine from Spurgeon's sermons. In the introduction of his *Lectures to All Students* he says, "My college lectures are colloquial, familiar, full of anecdotes and often humorous."

D. L. Moody is pictured as full of fun and good humor, and often playing jokes. [4] He could relax with young and old, toss back his head, laugh till it rocked, even wiping away tears from his eyes. It is said that he liked to gather his associates around him at the close of day to see who had the best story to tell. A lady once asked him how he could laugh not long after preaching a solemn sermon and coming from dealing with souls in the inquiry room. He replied, "If I didn't, I'd have a nervous breakdown at the pace at which I live." An associate said, "I have seen him roll on his couch with laughter." [5]

Roland Hill, who through the influence of George Whitefield became a great open-air preacher, used wit freely. When on a wet day several people took shelter in his church during a heavy shower while he was in the pulpit, he said, "Many people are greatly blamed for making their religion a cloak, but I do not think those are much better who make it an umbrella." [6]

Jonathan Edwards used humor in his letters, though not in his sermons. Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, Presbyterian preacher and editor, after warning about the seriousness of speech, says, "There is no objection to laughing at something funny. I read some magazines from back to front, just to laugh at the cartoons, and throw them down without reading any of their articles or stories." [7]

Rev. W. Douglas Roe, director of a Christian radio station in Pennsylvania, is a natural comedian, easily sending his hearers into stitches of laughter with his carefree lightheartedness. Few people know that in seminary days he suffered a breakdown caused by physical exhaustion. During college he had lived on two meals a day. At seminary he carried a scholastic load of seventeen hours, plus pastoring a large Baptist church which every year led the Philadelphia area in baptisms, plus seven weekly radio broadcasts. While dining at Wanamaker's he suddenly collapsed and was out of his pulpit for months. He would sleep for eighteen hours, then wake, would eat a little, then sleep another eighteen hours. He thought he would never preach again. He later served on Moody Bible Institute

Extension staff and for many years directed Montrose Bible Conference. He has learned to relax while he works. He says, "My sense of humor saves me."

Jim Elliot, missionary martyr, wrote in his diary in his senior year at Wheaton College, "God has blessed me with a queer twist that makes me laugh at almost anything, though sometimes it gets way out of hand. This may not be valid but what do you think of translating . . . I Timothy 1:11, 'the gospel of the happy God.' Whenever I get downcast, the Lord feeds me pills of praise." [8]

Luther once declared that he did not wish to go to heaven if God did not understand a joke. It has been suggested that much of his success as a reformer stemmed from his possession of a sense of humor. One of Wesley's favorite epigrams was "Sour godliness is the devil's religion." The late Dr. Will H. Houghton, former president of Moody Bible Institute, once confessed to a class at the Institute that his favorite comic strip was "Moon Mullins".

According to research conducted by the Yale University School of Medicine, a well-balanced personality usually has a well-developed sense of humor. The maladjusted person is likely to miss the amusing in jokes, cartoons and situations, or read something different into them. On the other hand, the mind at peace with itself notes the contradictions and incongruities of life but is not jarred by them. A sense of humor can be used in a Spirit-led life.

Humor can help release many wrong attitudes. For example, it can overcome self-pity by throwing things in true perspective, thus keeping us from making mountains out of molehills and from feeling sorry for ourselves.

A sense of humor can sometimes defeat pride by helping us debunk ourselves so we do not take ourselves too seriously. A famous English preacher by the name of Sheppard, in great demand as a speaker, found himself developing symptoms of the grippe the night before he was to begin an important series of lectures. Fussing and tossing on his bed till he fell asleep, he dreamed that he went to heaven and saw God pacing restlessly up and down. The Almighty was wringing His hands in despair and repeating, "What am I going to do? Dick Sheppard has a cold." When he awoke next morning he had a good laugh over it, then picked up his work with a corrected view of his own importance. Laughing at ourselves diminishes any obsession with our feelings of superiority. Humor, a means of self-scrutiny, can correct our pretensions and strip us of our affectations. The philosopher Bergson went so far as to claim that the specific remedy for vanity is laughter. A professor new on the golf course heard a caddie remark, "Anyone can teach Greek, but it takes brains to play golf." Somehow lifting himself above the situation, the professor was able to look at himself objectively. Raised above his extreme self-interest to see a truer, broader view of himself as a golf novice, he had a good laugh at himself. Laughter, a means of self-criticism, can also lessen the bitterness of failure.

A sense of humor can often help reduce murmuring and complaining, like the lady who reacted, "I've got a headache, but thank God I've got a head to ache." It can relieve discontent and palliate disappointment. Seeing her neighbors leaving for a Florida vacation, a northern housewife smilingly sighed, "We just stay here. It's cheaper!"

Ability to laugh can frequently tone down a critical spirit. A top-flight executive couldn't contact another executive in the same company because the latter was out getting a haircut. "Why does he have to get his hair cut on company time?" he inwardly criticized his fellow-executive, till it suddenly dawned on him that he always had his own hair cut on company time, only on another morning. Then he laughed at his inconsistency.

A sense of humor can sometimes help rid one of envy. A lady was jealous of her neighbor who had just bought a second car, till she laughingly siphoned off her envy with the thought, "Oh, well, now they have to get another license, take out another insurance policy and build another garage."

The disappointment aspect – expecting one thing and frustratingly getting another – is a main element in much humor. If we can develop the habit of laughing at the minor frustrations and disappointments of life, rather than magnifying little troubles far beyond their importance, life can prove much more enjoyable. Laughter has been called "an alchemy extraordinary" because it changes the base metal of painful experience into the gold of cheerful acceptance.

In many cases, humor can drain out resentment. A new pastor was informed six months after his arrival that certain members had voted against his coming. The pastor could have foolishly decided to hold a grudge against those members, but laughed and wisely replied, "I'm surprised anyone voted for me to come."

"Laugh it off" is good advice. Like an apple a day, a laugh a day keeps the doctor away. Communist philosophy has no room for a wholesome sense of humor. Grim, totalitarian like the Nazi doctrine, brutal and deterministic, it gives a lopsided and unhealthy view. But the Christian faith permits its followers to face tasks with smiling eyes, laughing hearts and genuine joy.

## HUMOR REFLECTS TRUTH

Humor is a teaching device, clarifying, illustrating, objectifying. The Master Teacher used it to throw into sharper and clearer focus the truths He was teaching.

Since a chief element in humor is incongruity, it lends itself easily to taking off on our silly banalities. How neatly it can deflate hypocrisy, conceit, pomposity and show. Spurgeon spoke of gossips as ladies who drink tea but talk vitriol. Our Lord used humor frequently to delineate the monstrous inconsistencies of the Pharisees. How absurd for a man to be forgiven a debt of over ten million, then fail to forgive another who owed him a paltry debt of ten dollars. Humor fits beautifully into the *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation. By pointing out the foibles of human nature, humor can say, "What fools these mortals be!"

Not only can humor make truth plainer, but wrapped in the form of a short story it can often obviate a laborious explanation or long and fruitless discussion. Instead of giving a detailed answer as to why he didn't give up engineering and enter the ministry full-time, David Fant, the well-known lay preacher and southern railroader of a generation ago, would silence his questioners with this humorous reply, "That would only cause the Southern railroad to lose a good engineer and God to gain a mighty poor preacher."

One popular preacher who attempted to show the possibility of getting all the animals into the ark used to quip, "If two elephants take up a lot of room, think of all the insects the size of fleas you can park on an elephant's back."

The impossibility of describing the beauties of heaven was partly overcome by one speaker who told of a little girl who said, as she looked up into the star-studded, blue-canopied sky one night, "Mother, if the wrong side of heaven is so pretty, what must the right side be like!"

Humor can be an asset in the pulpit. One homiletician went so far as to say that a neglect of skillful use of humor in preaching is an affront to God. [9] Two extremes to be avoided are: avoidance of humor and too heavy a reliance on humor. Some preachers seem to prepare their messages on the supposition that a law exists demanding that sermons be dull. Humor can brighten them up in addition to illuminating the truth. One seminary professor asserts that if one avoids the pitfalls of wrong humor, "a sense of humor and the use of that sense is an invaluable asset to every minister of the Gospel." Erasmus, in the introductory epistle to *The Praise of Folly*, pointed out to Sir Thomas Moore that the greatest minds of classical antiquity (Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, Plutarch) not only wrote on light subjects, but wrote lightly, because they knew that many readers would reap more advantages from such a form of treatment than from some bigger and more stately argument. Like the sugared coating of a healthful pill, a bit of humor helps people digest solid theology." [10]

A successful pulpiteer wrote a book to illustrate for young preachers "the way to use appropriate humorous incidents . . . to hold the attention of the audience and drive home the truth being presented. People are attracted by that which pleases them; they remember the joke and at the same time recall that which it was used to illuminate and illustrate. A speaker who knows how to use stories rightly should be grateful. I have heard cultured and highly-educated people tell a story at the beginning of their talk that had no connection whatever with what they said later, and while the story produced a laugh, it did not contribute anything to the message that followed. Someone has said, 'An appropriate story told at an appropriate time is like a fuse. It leads to a climax - an explosion.'" [11]

Many writers have critically examined the gospels to show that no proof exists for the facts they relate about the life of Christ, even strongly suggesting that He may never have existed. Archbishop Whateley wrote a little work, *Historic Doubts Relative to the Existence of Napoleon Bonaparte*, in which he shows that the actual history of this notorious personage really consisted of a number of improbable incidents. In fact, because so much suspicion attaches to the events recorded of Napoleon, the Archbishop hints, it is likely that he never lived. For some skeptics this humorous refutation of their position might yield a much greater impact than all the standard arguments presented in most logical fashion. Someone has said, "In its proper place nonsense may be sense."

Dr. William Ward Ayer, former pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in New York City, sprinkles his sermons with ample humor. There is a method in his mirth, he explains: "By telling a story with a real point, people's mouths open wide with laughter. While they are open I pour down big doses of truth." Let's not forget that many a truth is spoken in jest.

Some people resort to prayer in some situations where energy must be expended as well. Perhaps a story like the following can show the folly of praying and not working.

A passing motorist yelled to a man standing on his lawn, "Hey, your house is on fire!" "I know it, stranger," nodded the mountaineer.

"Then why not do something about it?" "I am. I'm praying for rain."

Another story along the same line tells how when Moody was crossing the ocean the boat caught on fire. A preacher friend suggested going off into a corner to pray. Moody

retorted, "We'll get right in line with the other men to pass buckets, and we'll pray as we pass the water."

Would not such anecdotes drive home the truth that sometimes we must answer our prayers ourselves?

Many fearful saints can't quite come to believe that their past has been forgiven through the merits of Christ. Dr. Walter Wilson tells a story that helps put this truth across. A ten-year-old boy wanted to be a preacher. When his black cat died one night, he thought this was an opportunity to start training for the ministry. He secured a shoebox and tenderly placed the corpse therein. Since the cat had died with its head to one side, so it could not face up as he had seen in coffins at funerals, he cut a hole in the lid of the box. This let the tail protrude so that visiting friends could see some part of the cat. He dug a grave in the back yard under the peach tree, obtained some string with which to lower the casket, and invited the neighbor children to attend the service. The sermon was given on the front porch. The procession marched to the back yard where the cat was gently lowered into the grave. When the boy filled the grave, the cat's tail was left unburied. Every two or three days the young preacher pulled up the cat, using the tail for a handle to examine its condition. After a few such times, the tail no longer held, but broke off, leaving the body buried. Dr. Wilson asks if this isn't just like many troubled saints who having confessed their sins, continue to drag them up, pull them out, spread them before the Lord, weep over them afresh, forgetting God has buried them.

### HUMOR RELAXES OTHERS

In one of D. L. Moody's English campaigns, a skeptical young man slid into the back of the meeting, intending to stay only a few minutes. At the time of his arrival a minister was making an unusually long prayer. Moody broke in, "While that good brother is finishing his prayer, we'll sing a hymn." Captivated by this incongruous turn of events, the young man remained, was won to Christ and became the father of Labrador missions. He was none other than Wilfred Grenfell.

Humor can break the ice, remove embarrassment, relieve tension, smooth over difficult situations. It can be used to create rapport when meeting a stranger, or when a speaker faces an entirely new audience. Invited to speak at noon-day services in a large industrial plant, Rev. W. Douglas Roe was tipped off in advance that a workman at a certain bench was an ardent atheist and never attended the service. Ambling up to his bench just before meeting time, Roe asked, "Did you ever think how much we have to thank God for?" Before the startled workman could reply, Roe continued, "Take your nose. If anyone else but God had given it to you, it might have been turned upside down. Then if it rained, you would drown, and if you sneezed, you would blow your hat off." Before the workman could recover, Roe was on his way to the pulpit. Charmed by Roe's infectious humor, the workman sat down and listened, later making a decision for Christ.

One writer termed people with winsome wit, "unconscious defenders of the faith." This same writer classified the English statesman, Sir William Wilberforce, as one of them. A titled lady pronounced him to be "the wittiest man in England." And of all Englishmen, it has been said that "he was the one who most attracted her mind towards genuine Christianity." [12]

When a speaker makes himself the hero of his anecdote, he raises a barrier between his audience and himself, for he makes himself superior. But if he makes himself the butt of his humor, he makes his audience feel superior, breaks down their reserve, and makes them more responsive to his message. The father of five daughters was invited to address a college chapel. He began, "I feel right at home on a college campus. You see – I have five daughters, no sons, at home. I live in a girls' dormitory." After some laughter the father continued, "I'm dean of women!" The roar of laughter indicated the father's humor had created a bond between audience and speaker. Psychology would explain that a speaker who makes himself the object of his own joke wins acceptance by suffering.

Billy Graham was scheduled to preach at a Texas Baptist Convention. People poured into the auditorium from everywhere. As those participating on the program walked on to the platform, people looked for the tall, blonde, handsome evangelist, but in vain. His plane had been grounded hundreds of miles away. But the audience was not informed till the substitute speaker was introduced. The deep disappointment of the people put the speaker under severe handicap. He began by telling a story.

"A church announced a strawberry festival, inviting everyone to come and eat all the strawberries and cream they wanted. Crowds came from near and far. The festival chairman rose and said, 'Our strawberry crop was a total loss this year. Sorry, we don't have any strawberries. But we do have prunes instead.'" The story not only brought down the house with laughter but did much to relieve the people's disappointment at not hearing Billy Graham.

The mind which naturally flags after brief concentration on any subject can be recaptured by humorous remarks at well-chosen moments. Should the subject sustain a high emotional pitch, humor can give a much-needed relief from tension. In the old-fashioned melodrama the overwrought feelings

of the spectators were relaxed by the entrance of the comic man. Ready for tears, the audience burst into the respite of laughter.

The relaxing power of humor is tacitly recognized in the "Case History of the New York issue of *Holiday*", available to journalism students to show how the editors planned and created this single-theme issue of October 1959. It is related that in early editorial meetings, after article-subject possibilities had been listed, the feeling was repeatedly expressed that the contents badly needed humor and light articles.

Likewise humor can often pour oil on troubled waters in real life. A pastor took a ten-week vacation when his church only allowed him a month. When he returned his congregation was hopping mad. After his assistant had led the first part of the service, the pastor stepped to the pulpit with this remark, "I used to preach here. Remember me?" The congregation broke into laughter and forgave him.

A preacher was driving past a streetcar terminal and forgot that the big electric car turned into the terminal. The motorman stopped his streetcar two inches from the preacher's car, poked his head out of the window and shouted, "Where are you going, you old fool?" The preacher could have gotten mad, started a fight, and perhaps created a sensational story for the newspapers about a fracas between a minister and a motorman. Instead he said, "That's my name, but I didn't know you knew me." The motorman laughed. Then the minister added, "Stand still and I'll back out; I always back out when I get in a tight place like this." The motorman smiled again and said, "All right, fellow, you're a good sport." [13]

At the GOP national convention in Chicago in 1952, angry, strife-torn delegates about at their ropes' end were rocked with laughter by the Puerto Rican alternate delegate, Marcelino Romani. First he demanded that his delegation be polled, painstakingly spelled out his name which at first could not be found by the credentials committee, could not recognize the clerk's pronunciation of a lady Puerto Rican delegate, and finally when the name was correctly pronounced, announced that she was not present at all. His polite voice and studied English plus the above confusion rocked the convention, which a few minutes before had been on the verge of mayhem, so that delegates rolled in the aisles convulsed with shrieking laughter. The International News Service began its report next day, "A belly laugh a day will keep the psychiatrist away, and the GOP convention was saved in the nick of time last night."

A church business meeting neared the boiling point. A new member who had come from Canada made a rather tactless, inflammatory talk. The atmosphere was electric; a spark would have caused a major explosion from which the church would have taken years to recover. Just then another member who had come from Canada some years before rose to his feet. "Don't worry about the remarks you just heard. People that come from Canada have queer ideas." Everyone laughed and the uproar saved an awkward situation. Laughter is contagious. Your laugh can make another person laugh; in turn, his laughter can make yours heartier. Less subject to irritation through seeing the funny side of things, a man with a good sense of humor can avoid unpleasant incidents and thus get along better with people. Do we not speak of "humoring people along"?

Petty marital squabbles can sometimes be skirted through humor. A temperamental husband used to throw things whenever he became angry. Once, very vexed, he picked up a plate that cost \$3.00 and smashed it. In reply, his wife followed his example. He in return heaved another and yet another until six plates had been broken. But by then both were rocking with merriment. The wife later confessed, "It was a Shakespearean scene which cost \$18.00, but it was worth it. Nothing like this ever happened again. Whenever he lost his temper after that, I had only to hand him the nearest platter and that stopped everything."

When Bible teacher Ralph Keiper and his wife were on their honeymoon, the bride attempted to press the trousers of her husband's new suit with a new iron received as a wedding present. When she applied the iron, part of the trousers went up in a puff of smoke. The groom rushed into the room. "Is everything all right? I smell smoke!" Whereupon the bride burst into tears and confessed what had happened. "Honey," he replied, "let's pray and give thanks that my leg wasn't in the trousers!" Marital counselors claim that the saving grace of humor, natural or cultivated can like a breath of fresh air blow petty strife away. A marriage sprinkled generously with humor isn't easily dissolved.

A missionary on furlough told how a fellow-missionary, through his ability to see the funny side of everything, was able to smooth over needlessly explosive situations.

Humor can blunt the sharpness of a rebuke, or the edge of a refusal, so as not to wound feelings. Humor can conquer situations that resist frontal attacks. Humor softens up cold, stem, truth. Dr. Vance Havner well-known Bible conference speaker, who liberally sprinkles his messages with incisive humor, says, "I could never speak sharply to people unless I used some humor with it." A man wishing to let his wife know in a subtle way that she did a lot of backseat driving, phrased it thus: "When we go driving, my wife and I co-operate well. She drives and I steer."

A man who headed a monastery in Normandy in medieval ages incurred the wrath of the Duke of that area by opposing his marriage. In a burst of rage the Duke ordered his men to burn the clergyman's house and drive him from the area. The Duke then came to see the work done and found the old clergyman hobbling on a lame horse toward the border. When he angrily ordered him to hurry, the clergyman promised to go faster if the Duke would give him a faster horse. "You're the first criminal who ever asked gifts from his judge," retorted the Duke, but a burst of laughter revealed that his wrath had gone. The Duke and the clergyman renewed their friendship.

Laughter prevented a robbery on March 30, 1959, in New York City. A nineteen-year-old stick-up lad entered the office of a fish warehouse and demanded the three-thousand-dollar payroll. But he wore such an outlandish mask that the switchboard operator, a secretary and other employees set up gales of laughter. Trying to be playful, a truck driver pulled off the mask and floored the would-be robber. Other forms of resistance, more direct than "disarming" laughter, might have proved fatal. No wonder power-hungry dictators are practically always humorless, for they cannot permit levity to punch through their protective crust of stem austerity.

Spurgeon tempered with humor his criticisms of his students. Once he dismissed his students for Christmas vacation by saying he would like to make each one a present. "For instance, here's Smith. I would give him a corkscrew. He has a good deal in him but it wants letting out. As for Jones, I'd give him a funnel, so he could get more in."

Moody, commenting on this incident, said to one of his students, "You know, I'd like to fasten a quarter pound of gunpowder to the tail of your coat and set fire to it." Once at a gathering he was leading, a clever plan for Sunday school work was suggested. "What do you think of it?" Moody asked the superintendent who replied, "We've been aiming to do it for two years." Instead of reacting with irritation, Moody's humorous retort made his point, "Don't you think it's about time to fire?"

One of Queen Victoria's chaplains, Goulburn, once said, "If there were more of the salt of wit in our ordinary conversation, its general vapid nature would be corrected – it would turn less upon the character, conduct, plans and arrangements of our neighbors – topics upon which perhaps it can never turn with any profit . . . without trenching hard, upon sin . . . For in default of which men seek diversion of the mind, some by empty gossip, some by foul conversation."

After a hard day's work in serious discussion, Spurgeon and a preacher friend went into the country for a walk. They roamed the fields in high spirits like boys released from school, chatting and laughing. When his friend told a story at which Spurgeon laughed uproariously, suddenly Spurgeon turned to his friend and exclaimed, "Let's kneel down and thank God for laughter." There under the blue sky two great spirits knelt and thanked the Lord for the joyous gift of laughter.

Give me the gift of laughter, oh, I pray,  
Though tears should hover near;  
Give me the gift of laughter for each day –  
Laughter to cast out fear.

With hope to greet the coming of each dawn,  
And faith that never dies;  
Give me the gift of laughter, oh, I pray –  
Laughter instead of sighs.

– Author Unknown

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 4

1 *Christian Life Magazine*, June 1957, p. 33.

2 Albert Rapp, *The Origins of Wit and Humor* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1951), p. 12.

3 Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson, editors, *The Puritans* (New York: Doubleday and Co. 1938), p. 392.

4 R. E. Day, *Bush Aglow* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1944), p. 286.

5 Will H. Houghton, Charles T. Cook, *Tell Me About Moody* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1937), p. 96.

6 Roland Hill, *Great Sermons of the World* compiled by Clarence E. Macartney (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. 1958), p. 237.

7 Donald Grey Barnhouse, *One Lord – One Master*, No. 82 (Philadelphia: Bible Study Hour), pp. 4, 5.

8 Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 78.

9 Webb B. Garrison, *The Preacher and His Audience* (Westwood, New Jersey: Revell, 1954), p. 192.

10 Jewett, *op. cit.*

11 James Whitcomb Brouger, Sr., *Life and Laughter* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1950), p. 10.

12 Stanford, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

13 Brouger, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

## CHAPTER 5

### It's Not Funny, Pal!

A Russian who worked with Stalin was asked if the late Russian dictator possessed a sense of humor. After reflection the Russian answered, "If you were leaving a room and accidentally walked into the door, striking your nose, then Stalin would laugh."

A sense of humor may be misused, even perverted. There are areas where humor ceases to be humor. A person with a twisted sense of humor may laugh at something which only makes others react, "That wasn't funny." Or when an overstaged prank misfires, bystander as well as victim may exclaim, "It's no joke!" Theology teaches that the fall of man stains every faculty of human nature, which would include his sense of humor.

From all our pleasantries should be banished anything immoral, injurious, insipid and irreverent. "There is a time to laugh" (Ecclesiastes 3:4); also, there is a time to refrain from laughter. Humor must be limited to proper times and topics. Of certain matters it can be said, "Hands off – these are not to be laughed at."

#### IMMORAL HUMOR

To listen to conversation in office, shop or fraternity, to tune in some comedians, or to read jokes in some magazines, leads to the conclusion that humor cannot proceed any appreciable distance before it must dip into the mire of obscenity. Such suggestiveness is clearly forbidden by the New Testament. "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks" (Ephesians 5:3, 4).

The word "jesting" means "versatility" or "aptness in turning". It implies nimbleness of wit in turning conversation into another channel and in mixing in double meanings. It is our modern word "suggestiveness". But it is suggestiveness along certain lines. The context makes it clear that jesting along immoral lines is forbidden. Paul warns against impurity of life in verse 3, then in verse 4 against impurity of speech. Quick innuendo, smart repartees and hidden inferences in which improprieties are implied are the targets of the apostle's censure. One of Queen Victoria's chaplains paraphrased verse 4, "Let there be no coarseness, nor vapid and gossiping conversation, no, nor even the refined, but sinful raillery of the man of fashion." [1] The apostle does not mean to condemn all play of humor, which is a divine gift and which in moderation can refresh a spirit.

The city of Ephesus, to which Paul's letter was written, was famous for its shameless lust. On every hand, street conversation would be twisted into double-meaning suggestiveness. Hidden sensual meaning would pollute much talk. Thus, this command would be well understood. Not jesting per se, but jesting that is vulgar draws the apostle's fire. All ribald, obscene stories should be wiped from our repertoire. It was against such humor, the immoral, swashbuckling and bawdy mirth of the Elizabethan stage that the Puritans reacted so strongly.

It is said that Will Rogers never told a vulgar story. Asked to repeat an off-color story he had just heard, Will Rogers replied, "I have to wait three days before I can tell it. It'll take that long to launder it." He never told it. On another occasion when he was final speaker at a banquet, he joshed every previous speaker, except one. Referring to this particular speaker who had related a suggestive story, Rogers said, "Judging by the story my friend told, I guess his mind is like a race horse – it runs best on a dirt track."

One day in a group of men one fellow said, I have a good story to tell. There are no women around."

One of the men replied, "But there are gentlemen around." Immoral jokes abuse God's gift of humor.

#### INJURIOUS HUMOR

Hearing junior crying, mother asked, "What's the matter, dear?"

He whimpered, "Daddy hit his thumb with a hammer."

"You shouldn't cry over that; you should laugh," said mother. "That's the trouble," replied junior, "I did laugh."

Pleasantries are all right, but "meaneries" are all wrong. When humor hurts it ceases to be good humor. We may laugh at the mild discomfiture of others, but the minute the discomfiture passes over a

certain line to become suffering, laughing takes on improper proportions. The dividing line may be tissue-thin separating laughter and tears. How often we say, "If it weren't so tragic, it would be funny!" Jokes on death, mental hospitals and surgery, among other touchy topics, may violate the virtue of tender-heartedness if told in the presence of someone who has just had close dealings with any of these experiences. Kindliness, an element of legitimate humor, keeps us from capitalizing on unfair situations. Humor should always be generously sprinkled with grace (Colossians 4:6). Someone has said, "Wit should be harmless like diffused summer heat lightning, not like forked lightning."

Laughter can be a tonic of real value, fostering mental health. On the other hand, it may prove a poisonous weapon, causing great injury. Like the tongue, humor is a fountain capable of sending forth both sweet and bitter water. Humor that harms includes sarcasm, scorn, snobbery and sadism. In fact, according to Webster's dictionary, the word "sarcasm" comes from the Greek root which means "to tear at the flesh like a dog." Ridicule between Christians is one method by which believers may "bite and devour one another" (Galatians 5:15).

With unkind superiority one may laugh at another's handicaps, like the little boy smiling at a crippled girl's attempt to cross a road. "Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling-block before the blind" (Leviticus 19:14). Or one may sneer at another's appearance, like the children mocking Elisha, "Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head" (II Kings 2:23-25). Or one may poke fun at another's seeming insignificance like Ishmael who scoffingly ridiculed the baby Isaac as the heir and father of many nations, perhaps at the banquet in honor of Isaac's weaning (Genesis 21:8,9).

When Jacob's sons saw their young brother Joseph approaching, they sneeringly said, "Behold, this dreamer cometh" (Genesis 37:19). Though Joseph may have unwisely revealed his future superiority over his brothers, the latter were guilty of sarcasm. Injurious words were followed by injurious deeds as Joseph was thrown in a pit. One can imagine the lad's pleas for release and almost hear the brothers' retort, "What about your dreams now?"

How often have the suffering righteous been mocked. Job, a man of wealth, righteousness and kindness, later reduced to poverty and ill health, became the laughing-stock of his neighbors. Said he, "I am as one mocked of his neighbor . . . the just upright man is laughed to scorn" (Job 12:4). He also lamented, "And now am I their song, yea, I am their byword" (Job 30:9). The suffering but righteous David speaks of those "that say unto me, Aha, aha" (Psalm 40:15). The prophet Jeremiah was derided daily (Jeremiah 20:8). One of Edom's sins involving laughing over Judah's afflictions in the day of their calamity (Obadiah 12). Mockery is part of the persecution of the prophet of God (Matthew 5:11, 12).

When our superiority is directed against another race, it becomes snobbery. Humor which makes another social group the butt of its joke should best be avoided. It is better humor to show up the incongruities of your own group. Too much enjoyment of jokes that disparage any particular group reveals our repressed malice against that group. One psychiatrist stated that some professional comedians are loaded with aggressions.

A preacher suddenly came to the realization that a snobbish remark about a parishioner's poverty was disrupting his church unity. Visiting at a poor farm house he had been offered milk and bread and an old-fashioned iron spoon. To one of his officials he jokingly referred to the episode with the remark, "An iron spoon is a trifle heavy on the meal." Others joined his hearty laugh at a jest by which he meant no harm. In time his comment traveled back to the farmhouse. The hostess said, "I'm sorry that the preacher had to have his fun at our expense. If we were rich we could have given him a silver spoon. But we did give him the best that we had." Learning how she felt, the preacher immediately headed to her farm, riding through a storm to make his apology.

Ridicule should never be used as a substitute for answering the arguments of an opponent. How tempting, when arguing for our viewpoint, to make those who hold the opposite position appear ridiculous, especially when we know that truth may be more on their side than on ours. True humor belongs to the family of truth.

Because ridicule hurts, many people would rather be disliked than laughed at. Satan uses scorn to try to further his own cause and oppose God's work. Many a person has been laughed into a course of evil action, afraid of the taunts of ungodly companions. Not wishing to be called a sissy, old-fogey, or tied to mama's apron strings, many young people have succumbed to temptation. "Everybody's doing it. Don't be a back number or a wet blanket," is the adversary's line of ridicule. The fear of man's scorn brings a snare. Repeatedly through history the righteous have had to withstand the jeering jibes of the wicked. "The proud have had me greatly in derision: yet have I not declined from thy law" (Psalm 119:51).

Other scriptural examples include the mockery of those refusing to prepare for the Passover according to Hezekiah's proclamation as they laughed to scorn those wishing to keep the celebration (II Chronicles 30: 10); and the sneering by Sanballat against those who wished to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, "What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?"

. . . Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall” (Nehemiah 4:2,3).

Aware that sarcasm stings, God has permitted His people to be reproached as part of their punishment for unfaithfulness to Him. “Thus saith the Lord God . . . thou shalt be laughed to scorn and had in derision” (Ezekiel 23:32). “I should make thee a desolation, and the inhabitants thereof an hissing: therefore ye shall bear the reproach of my people” (Micah 6:16). People have been kept from wrongdoing by the thought of deserving reproach. The fear of righteous ridicule may be a deterrent to wrong-doing.

When humor becomes meanly vindictive, it may proceed past sarcasm, snobbery, scorn and end in sadism. When the Ammonites under King Hanun’s orders humiliated David’s peace-bearing envoys by shaving off half of their beards and cutting off their garments in the middle so as to make them naked from the waist down, this mean mockery bordered on sadism (II Samuel 10:4).

Practical jokes, to qualify as acceptable in a Christian frame of reference, must be devoid of malice. In one of the shops in old, colonial Williamsburg, is a little box which when opened reveals a large imitation spider. Conceivably, a genteel lady of the eighteenth century startled momentarily at first sight, but quickly recovered composure on noting its non-injurious nature. But some practical jokes camouflage a desire to inflict pain. When a wedding was about to begin, the best man was missing. A phone call came for the bride. She came back sobbing, unable to go through with the wedding, for on the phone was the best man who convinced her that the groom had been married before. It was just a joke but it postponed the wedding for a day, putting a never-to-be-forgotten damper on the whole affair. One wife playfully held out her hand in front of her husband, who had just returned, from a hunting trip, daring him to hit it. She knew he wouldn’t do such a thing. He took careful aim and filled her hand with buckshot. He thought the safety catch was on. Another prankster ran an ad in the paper offering to buy one thousand used Christmas trees, but gave for the delivery address the street number of a man he had a grudge against. Though these pranks may have disguised little hostility, the ultimate step in the ladder of injurious humor is the cruel laugh of secret service guards in concentration camps as they conduct fiendish experiments on helpless victims.

Since truth may often be spoken in jest, humor may veil a barbed jab, needling, cutting, knifing its victims. Any form that would maliciously sting is forbidden by the law of love. However, humor spoken in kindness to correct a fault does not injure but rather edifies. Rebukes administered sympathetically, not harshly, are compatible with New Testament principles, a form of speaking the truth of love. Though such humor may temporarily pain, because its ultimate purpose is to purify, it should be classified, not as destructive, but constructive. Mercy, not malice, must manipulate the scalpel of ridicule, as in the sinless scorn of the Saviour. Speaking of Paul’s irony against inflated Corinthian leaders, one commentator points out:

Scripture warrants the use of irony in certain cases. There are certain conditions that can be most successfully touched by the shafts of ridicule . . . But irony is a keen and dangerous weapon, and should be employed with great care. A suitable weapon for the hands of Paul, not of necessity for ours . . . Its use should be limited. We may easily run to excess . . . It should be employed in a spirit of love and with sincere desire to benefit. Not to make men ridiculous for the sake of making them so . . . ; he had no pleasure in causing them pain. [2]

## INSIPID HUMOR

Someone wrote a tract *America Is Laughing Itself to Death*. To offset the highest per capita boredom of any nation on the face of the earth, entertainers think up every imaginable gag. Anything for a laugh. Humor has become big business. The highest-paid single attraction on TV in 1956 was comedian Jackie Gleason, whose salary reached \$3,000,000 in that year. [3]

Foolish talking which is forbidden in Ephesians 5:4 is one word in Greek. The first part gives us our English “moron”. The word could be translated “moron-speaking”. One modern translator renders it “silliness”. We are not to chatter like morons, court jesters or clowns, known more for wisecracks than for worth-while conversation. Humor which has its legitimate place may get out of bounds. We should reflect Christ even in moments of humor. If our humor is seasoned with salt, it will not be insipid.

When we are told to avoid foolish questions (II Timothy 2:23; Titus 3:9), again the word used for “foolish” gives us our English “moron”. We are not to get entangled in empty, useless questions. A modern example of pointless disputation may be “Where did Cain get his wife?”

Some people laugh about everything. They are convulsed in one continuous guffaw, or go around with a perpetual grin on their chin as if life were one big joke. However, life is serious. The earnestness of existence should moderate the use of humor to its proper level. Mirth is not the final solution to life’s problems, and to use it as though it were is like turning the radios on full blast in a hospital to drown out the groans of the dying. Admittedly, laughing and joy are not the same. Because a person is laughing, it does not follow that he is rejoicing in the Lord. On the contrary, a person may laugh

raucously to cover up the empty ache of a dissatisfied heart. "Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness" (Proverbs 14:13). A young man went to a doctor to find a cure for his blues. After suggesting several remedies, all of which the patient had tried without success, the doctor said, "There's only one suggestion left. Go to the minstrel show which has recently come to town, and if the clown who has so successfully amused his audiences with his clever antics can't drive away your blues, I don't know what can."

"Alas," replied the young man, "I am that clown!" More than one comedian has confessed his inner unhappiness. Another funnyman was recently taken to a psychiatric ward for observation. The writer of Ecclesiastes in his search for happiness had tried mirth but concluded, "I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?" (Ecclesiastes 2:2) Excessive use of humor may indicate a big lack in our lives which we are trying to replace with a pack of gags.

Just as a clown is out of place as a permanent fixture in daily life, so immoderate use of humor may degrade the nobility and solemnity of life. The person who utilizes it excessively may never be taken seriously. For example, the punster who saturates his work, verbal or written, with puns may pay the penalty of not having his work received with sober consideration.

It is hard to believe that many fashionable pulpiteers in the days of King James I aimed to distinguish themselves by punning. One delivered himself thus, "The dial shows that we must die all; yet, nevertheless, all houses are turned into ale houses; our cares into cakes; our paradise into a pair o' dice; our marriage into a merry age; our matrimony into a matter o' money; our divines have come dry wines; it was not so even in the days of No-ah; ah! no." [4]

Someone has said, "Make not jests till thou become one."

Not only may the constant joker not be taken seriously, but overindulgence in humor may lead to levity and flippancy on the weighty matters of life and death. Life may become less earnest and less real.

Stephen Leacock tells of a poem written by Julia Moore, a great super-comic poet of the late nineteenth century, which dealt with a disastrous railway accident in Ohio in 1878 in which P. P. Bliss, America's second most prolific hymn-writer, lost his life. The first stanza begins:

Have you heard the dreadful fate,  
Of Mr. P. P. Bliss and wife?  
Of their death I will relate,  
And also others lost their life;  
Ashtabula Bridge disaster,  
Where so many people died  
Without a thought that destruction  
Would plunge them 'neath the wheel of tide.

Quoting this poem while lecturing in Chicago, Leacock reports the audience reacted with great hilarity. After the lecture an elderly gentleman approached Leacock, "I was interested in your reference to the Ashtabula Bridge disaster. I lived in the town as a young man at the time. Poor Bliss! I knew him quite well. He suffered terribly." The poem lost its comicality for Leacock who never used it again. He commented, "One cannot joke with death. Let humor keep to its bounds." [5]

Movie star Errol Flynn, fifty years old and three times married, died in Vancouver, Canada, on a trip to sell his \$100,000 schooner. He had already squandered seven million dollars and was still pursuing his two admitted hobbies, women and wine. With him on the trip was his seventeen-year-old girlfriend. He had summed up his life in the tide of his autobiography, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*. His hostess in Vancouver said, "He died laughing."

Some people are laughing when they should be repenting (Isaiah 22:12; Joel 2:12). Through His prophet, the Lord told His people Israel that feasts of laughter would be turned into fasts of mourning (Amos 8:10,11). "Be afflicted and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness" (James 4:9). Saddening reflection provides moral training more profitable than thoughtless mirth (Ecclesiastes 7:3). Spiritual decay results when we spend in merry revelry time and energy which should be devoted to more serious pursuits. Jesus said some laughter should be turned to mourning (Luke 6:25). Says the poet,

I walked a mile with pleasure,  
She chatted all the way,  
And left me none the wiser,  
For all she had to say.  
I walked a mile with suffering,  
And ne'er a word said she,  
But, oh, the things I learned from her,  
When suffering walked with me.

– Author Unknown

Some Christians oppose humor because Jesus said, "Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36). However, "idle" and "humorous" are not synonymous terms. Words may be humorous without being idle, for certain humor has its profitable place. The condemnation of idle words by Jesus therefore does not necessarily refer to humor. The Greek word "idle" is composed of two parts, the noun "work" with a negative prefix. An idle word is one which is not working. The reason the Lord uttered the warning was that the Pharisees had just uttered an idle statement. When it was reported to the Pharisees that Jesus had healed a demon-possessed man who was both blind and dumb, they had to react with some comment. In their jealousy of Jesus they blurted out, without thinking it through or without working it over in their minds, that Jesus did the miracle through the power of Satan. This accusation easily backfired, for Jesus showed that if He cast out demons by Satan then the house of Satan was divided against itself. The Pharisees had cast out their accusation idly. It was then, after a few intervening words on the danger of attributing the works of the Holy Spirit to the devil, that Jesus warned against idle words. An idle word is a careless word, not a humorous word, though some humor may fall into the "idle" category. We are to beware of humor which is the reckless output of a vacant mind. "For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool" (Ecclesiastes 7:6).

### IRREVERENT HUMOR

Serious truths should not be treated lightly. A weekly radio studio audience was warmed up before a network broadcast by an announcer who invariably told a joke about hell that made everyone roar with laughter. Probably the majority of the audience didn't like to consider hell a reality, so took advantage of this opportunity to laugh it away. A speaker once told a church congregation about an evangelist who spoke on "Hell" after which the soloist sang, "Tell Mother I'll Be There". Though some laughed, many mothers in the congregation with non-Christian children could not appreciate the joke. If hell is a real place, as Christ taught, it is no laughing matter.

Likewise, reference to heaven in such terms as "Peter at the pearly gate" may not show the finest taste. How often in conversation our familiarity with holy subjects is in danger of slipping to flippancy. Some smilingly say, "Oh, I'll get around to it when the Spirit moves me," a careless reference to none other than the Third Person of the Trinity. Students about to graduate from Christian schools have jokingly said, "Oh, I'll graduate, the Dean willing," a pert substitution for "the Lord willing".

Humor plunged to the depths when Jesus became the target of unbelieving scorn as the soldiers striking Him asked Him, "Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?" (Matthew 26:68); and when robing Him in scarlet, plaiting a crown of thorns on His head, placing a reed in His right hand, they bowed and mocked Him, "Hail, King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:29); and when the passers-by wagged their heads, saying, "Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matthew 27:40); and when the chief priests, scribes, elders and thieves mocked, "He saved others; himself he cannot save" (Matthew 27:42). This railing at Christ was prophesied in Messianic Psalms (Psalm 22:7; 69:12).

One skeptic sneered, as he waited impatiently in a hotel, "This elevator is as slow as the second coming of Christ." Ridiculing this precious doctrine of the Christian faith was foretold by Peter, "Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation" (II Peter 3:3, 4). Smirking at the miraculous in God's revelation slaps at the supernatural.

A comic Bible was published in France at the start of the anti-clericalism of the Third Republic. However, this proved offensive even to many opponents of Christianity, showing there is an area marked off as unjokable.

Care must be exercised against quoting Bible verses to point up a jest. Admittedly, there are occasions when the Bible and humor can be mingled without belittling the sacred Word. Perhaps more often, use of the Bible in a trite and thoughtless context lessens its importance and influence, both on those that hear us as well as on ourselves. The same caution should be used with hymns lest the import of their sacred message be forever ruined.

Dr. Isaac Page, late deputation secretary for the *China Inland Mission*, was extremely fond of jokes, but had definite convictions about mixing Scripture with humor. At a dinner he was attending the question was asked, "Who will go out and get the bread?"

Page heard a voice reply, "Here am I; send me."

"Who said that?" Page demanded. Meekly a young college girl owned up. He gave her a little sermonette against the practice which was never forgotten by the girl, who today holds a responsible position in a Christian college.

Speaking of a heavily traveled avenue, someone said, "On this street there are just two types of pedestrians, the quick and the dead." Another said there would be no women in heaven for the Bible

says, "There was silence in heaven for the space of a half hour." In both cases, God's inspired Word was used as a springboard for a jest. Next time these verses were quoted in church or read in devotions, their serious edge had somehow been dulled for those who had heard the jokes.

Bishop Jeremy Taylor once said that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, but not for jesting. He also said, quite strongly, "Of all the abuses that ever dishonored the tongues of men, nothing more deserves the whip of an exterminating angel, or the stings of scorpions, than profane jesting; which is a bringing the Spirit of God to partake of the follies of a man; as if it were not enough for man to be a fool, but the wisdom of God must be brought into these horrible scenes. He that makes a jest of the words of Scripture, or of holy things, plays with thunder, and kisses the mouth of a cannon just as it belches fire and death; . . . he laughs at damnation, while he had rather lose God than his jest; nay, which is the horror of all, he makes a jest of God Himself, and the Spirit of the Father and the Son, to become ridiculous." [6]

Serious themes should be approached in a serious vein. A theological student was coming to the climax of his sermon on "Noah and the Ark". He was dramatically picturing the fate of those who had refused to enter the ark. Graphically describing the falling torrents which rose higher and higher, forcing people to seek the mountains, and emphasizing that these people who not many days before had laughed at Noah, he exclaimed, "Now their giggles changed to gurgles!" The young theologian's audience burst into titters, the whole serious train of thought dissipated. He never used that expression again, nor introduced humor at a serious point.

Though it has its place in the pulpit, humor can be overdone. The spirit of a service or an entire conference can vanish if a speaker mistakes himself for a clown in a circus operating on a "laugh-a-minute or your money back" offer. Levity, where there should be gravity, is wrong.

Spurgeon once said, "We must conquer our tendency to levity. A great distinction exists between holy cheerfulness, which is a virtue and that general levity which is a vice. There is a levity which trifles with everything – it is flippant, hollow, unreal. A hearty laugh is no more levity than a hearty cry. I speak of that religious veneering which is pretentious, but thin, superficial and insincere about the weightiest matters."

Not only the humor we make, but also the humor that amuses us, is important. A man may refrain from making fun of someone in the other's presence, but will let loose his mockery in private to his wife or close friend. True, he will not create the havoc which would have been the case had he released his sarcasm in public. Nevertheless, what we laugh at, even in solitude, is significant. The German author Goethe said, "By nothing do men show their character more than by the things they laugh at." The author of Ecclesiasticus put it this way, "A man's grinning laughter shows the kind of man he is." Another has put it, "What we laugh at is a window to our minds. Our jokes reveal our inner nature better than our set speeches.

If you are amused by an off-color story, it points up the impurity of your heart. If you laugh at another's serious accident, it shows cruelty deep within. If you overly indulge in caustic wit, it may indicate envy of the person against which your barbs are directed, and even beyond that, basic insecurity. If you are extremely addicted to punning, a dyed-in-the-wool punster, your constant conflicting play on words may result from your own conflicting feelings within. If you make light of holy subjects, it reveals profanity inside. Perhaps the words of Jesus could be paraphrased, admittedly giving only a partial explanation of the text, "By thy humor shalt thou be justified, and by thy humor shalt thou be condemned" (Matthew 12:37). If only one person in the world on only one occasion was guilty of just one bit of offside humor, he would still need the blood of Jesus Christ for cleansing.

The choice of entertainment via radio, TV and literature, on the part of many, falls short of Christian grace, even short of the standard of enlightened nature. To avoid this blemish of personal piety we need to know when to laugh and when not to. Humor leaps outside its legitimate sphere when it trespasses on the suggestive, the sarcastic, the silly and the sacrilegious.

Dr. A. T. Pierson said, "If God had not meant us to laugh, He would not have put 250 muscles in the human face, which are all brought into exercise only in a hearty laugh; and He would not have given to man alone, of all animals, a true laughing faculty. But even a normal capacity may be indulged to excess, and, instead of being a blessing, becomes a danger.

"There is perhaps no one form of enjoyment more liable to excess than the play of wit. There seems to be a special proneness to excess in the indulgence of fun, so that it soon ceases to be innocent and becomes hurtful, gliding into irreverence and sometimes profanity. All tendencies to habitual frivolity are of necessity hurtful. We must not sacrifice the vitality of sobriety, or the capacity for earnestness. Goldsmith wrote: 'The company of fools may at first make us smile, but at last never fails to render us melancholy.'" [7]

Spurgeon said, "Cheerfulness is one thing, and frivolity is another; he is a wise man who by a serious happiness of conversation steers between the dark rocks of moroseness and the quicksand of

levity. Those of us who are endowed with the dangerous gift of humor need to stop sometimes and take the word out of our mouth and look at it, to see whether it is edifying.”

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 5

- 1 Edward M. Goulburn, *The Idle Work* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1869), p. 136.
- 2 *The Pulpit Commentary*, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
- 3 *Look Magazine*, February 7, 1957.
- 4 Stanford, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- 5 Leacock, *op. cit.*, p. 183.
- 6 Stanford, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
- 7 Arthur T. Pierson, *Godly Self Control* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott), Chapter 14.

## CHAPTER 6

### Humor in the Bible

**D**oes a serious book like the Bible have humor in it? Besides the words “laugh” or “laughing” which appear about forty times, is there anything that could qualify as humorous in sacred Scripture?

I read through the Bible searching for every possible item that could be classified under this category in its broadest sense, whether of the right or wrong kind. As a result of the research, I found humor in approximately sixty of the sixty-six books of the Bible, and my notes fill one hundred pages of a medium-sized loose-leaf notebook. References will be made to forty-one books of the Bible in this chapter.

Perhaps someone may accuse me of possessing an over-activated sense of humor, reading into situations something funny where it does not exist. The counter suggestion could be made that if barriers of language, culture and the centuries that separate us from Bible speech, customs and times could be spanned, perhaps twice as many examples of humor could be discovered in the Bible. Worth repeating is a statement by a well-known Bible teacher of an earlier generation, quoted in the first chapter of this book: “Biblical examples might be collated of every sort of weapon to be found in the whole armory of humor – wit, satire, irony, retort, ridicule, raillery, drollery, play on words – these and other forms of the ludicrous are employed by prophets, apostles, and some of them even by our Lord Himself as a means to rebuke and expose error and wrong and vindicate truth and right.” [1]

The Bible contains Samson’s riddle, “Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness” (Judges 14:14). The answer is honey out of the lion.

Since the Bible deals with people, and people are funny everywhere because they have been created by God to make and enjoy the incongruous, then the Bible necessarily contains snatches of the humorous. The following examples illustrate but by no means exhaust the field of humor in the Bible. These references do not include the instances given in the two following chapters on the humor of Jesus and the laughter of God.

#### PLAY ON WORDS

Dr. Arthur B. Fowler, former missionary to the Near East and veteran teacher in the Old Testament field, says, “There are scores of plays on words in the Bible. One characteristic of Semitic talk is to play with sounds rather than to deal with thoughts. I remember how in my early missionary life in Syria a couple of Moslem teachers would be conversing with us in seeming earnestness, but we would later discover that by slightly changing the sound of words they had put a false meaning into their apparently earnest remarks to us. If you are at home in the Hebrew Bible, you will find it full of lovely tricks of Hebrew expression.” [2]

Living on the caravan route that carried much of the commerce of the ancient world between Egypt and the north and east, Abram met many merchants. When a trader introduced himself, Abram was compelled to give his name, which means “high father” or “father of many”. Dr. Barnhouse suggests, “It must have happened a hundred times, and each time more galling than the time before. ‘Oh, Father of many! Congratulations! And how many sons do you have?’ And the answer was so humiliating to Abram: ‘None.’ And many a time there must have been the half-concealed snort of humor at the incongruity of the name and the fact that there were no children to back up such a name.” [3]

Some time after Ishmael was born, God changed his name to Abraham which means “father of a multitude” (Genesis 17:5). Dr. Barnhouse comments:

There are some things in the Bible that cause me to chuckle and there is a thought in connection with this verse that always has had that effect on me. I cannot help but think of what must have happened when Abraham broke the news to his family and servants that he was now changing his name . . . Were there some who said to themselves with a laugh, “The old man couldn’t take it. It got under his skin after all these years. After all, to be father of nobody for eighty-six years and then to be the father of only one, with a name like he has . . . must have its rough moments. So he is going to change his name. I wonder what it will be.” And then the old man spoke. “I am to be known as Abraham – father of a multitude.” We can almost hear the silence of the stunned moment as the truth breaks upon them. Father of a multitude? Then the laughter broke forth behind the scenes. Father of a multitude! Was there anything more ridiculous for a man of his age? [4]

We read in Genesis 26:8, "Isaac was sporting with Rebekah his wife." To reproduce the effect we could say, "Isaac was isaacing with Rebekah" or more literally "laughter was making to laugh with Rebekah."

After Samson's slaughter of a thousand Philistines using the jawbone of an ass as a weapon, he exclaimed, "With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men" (Judges 15:16). He "celebrated his victory by a play on words – the original word for 'ass' and 'heaps' being nearly the same. Wordsworth reproduces the poetic paronomasia thus:

"With the jaw bone of an ass, a mass, two masses . . .' One student suggests – "I ass-ass-inated them' as an approach to the witty original." [5]

A delicate play of words occurs in Isaiah's prophecy: "and he looked for judgment (*mishpat*), but behold oppression (*mishpah*); for righteousness (*tsidaqah*), but behold a cry (*tsooqah*)" (5:7). An English equivalent has been suggested, "He looked for equity and lo, iniquity; for a sceptre and lo, a spectre."

The prophet Amos warns, ". . . a basket of summer fruit. Then said the Lord unto me, The end is come upon my people of Israel . . ." (8:2). The word for summer is *qaits* while that for end is *qats*. The play on words fits the picture of summer fruit soon perishing, thus coming to an end.

Dr. Fowler says that several prophets make plays on their own names.

"Who is a God like unto thee . . ." (Micah 7:18). *Micah* means 'Who is like Jehovah?' 'Whence shall I seek comforters for thee?' (Nahum 3:7). *Nahum* means 'comforter'. 'It may be ye shall be hid . . .' (Zephaniah 2:3). *Zephaniah* means 'Hidden of Jehovah'. 'They shall no more be remembered . . .' (Zechariah 13:2). *Zechariah* means 'remembered of Jehovah'. [6]

Coming to the New Testament we find plays on words in the Pauline epistles. One professor proposes, "Perhaps Paul gave the pun canonical stature. In Philippians 4:2 he exhorts two women, one of whom is named Euodeas, to oneness of mind. Later on in the same chapter (v. 18) he refers to the gifts which the Philippians had given him as an 'odor of a sweet smell literally an odor of 'euodia.' It has been suggested that this is a pleasant pun on the name of the lady whom he knew to have been influential in preparing the gift for him." [7]

Paul tells the Thessalonians that he hears "there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies" (II Thessalonians 3:11). The words "working" and "busybodies" in Greek are participles from the same verb, except that the second verb had a prepositional prefix to make it intensive. It could be paraphrased, "Some work not, but are working hard officiously bustling in other people's affairs." Other translations are "Busybodies instead of busy," and "minding everybody's business but their own." The idea is that they are not working, yet working hard at one and the same time.

In similar thought Paul writes to Timothy about the paradox of people who are both idle and busy (1 Timothy 5:13). He pictures persons whose hands are hanging still but whose tongues are swinging vigorously.

Picturesquely Paul describes false teachers, who are averse to work but who like to eat, as "slow bellies" (Titus 1:12). Literally "idle stomachs", these two words portray a false teacher who is lazy and gluttonous.

Some Bible scholars believe Paul made a pun on Onesimus' name in the letter to Philemon. Runaway-slave Onesimus, converted through Paul's preaching at Rome, is sent back to his master, Philemon, with a magnificent plea for kind treatment. Onesimus' name means "profitable". Paul writes, "Let me have joy of thee" (vs. 20), which could more accurately be translated, "Let me have profit of thee." One scholar suggests that this play on words adds a delicate touch to his hope that Philemon will find his old slave now useful.

## HUMOR IN IDEAS

By association of incongruous items, often in similes and metaphors, the Book of Proverbs conveys moral truth in a concise, pointed and often humorous way.

Fancy a dumb insect teaching a smart man. But a big man, if lazy, can learn from a tiny ant, because the latter is industrious. "Go to the ant, thou sluggard" (Proverbs 6:6).

We would smile if we saw a gold ring hanging from a pig's nose. Similarly, improper conduct of a pretty lady spoils her outward beauty. "As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion" (Proverbs 11:22). We might say of her, "Beautiful but dumb!"

The wide-open spaces are to be preferred to living in a house with a nagging wife. "It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman" (Proverbs 21:19). Her scolding words are like the continuous dripping of single drops on a stormy day. "A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike" (Proverbs 27:15). One commentator suggests that

because eastern houses were poorly constructed, roofs leaked easily through the porous materials, and the steady dropping of rain could drive a man out of his house. A man with a weather-beaten face was asked by a stranger, “How did you get that outdoor look? You appear so healthy.”

The man replied, “When we were married, my wife and I agreed that we wouldn’t argue but that if she became angry, rather than fight, I would go outside till she cooled off. You can see, I’ve lived an outdoor life!”

The passer-by who meddles in other people’s strife, is compared to a man who takes hold of a dog by the ears; he can neither safely hold on to the animal nor let go (Proverbs 26:17). Trusting in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like leaning on a broken tooth or a dislocated foot (Proverbs 25:19). A lazy man in bed is likened to a door turning on its hinges (Proverbs 26:14). This proverb conjures up several possible pictures. Just as a door moves from side to side on its hinges but travels nowhere, so a lazy fellow turns in bed from side to sides but doesn’t get up. Or just as a door creaks when it moves, so a slothful man groans when aroused. Or as a door is now open, then shut, so a lazy man lifts up on one elbow, then falls back in bed.

How amusing when a person wags his tongue constantly, pretending knowledge about all subjects, but when asked simple directions to the near-by city, doesn’t know (Ecclesiastes 10:14,5).

The boasting of Assyria as to its strength and position is like an axe boasting itself over the one that swings it, or like the saw magnifying itself above the hand that uses it (Isaiah 10: 15).

Picture a tall man in a short bed with narrow sheets. When one side is covered and comfortable, the other side is uncovered and chilly. See the tall fellow pulling his knees up and pulling covers from side to side, twisting, turning, wiggling. The prophet uses this humorous picture to teach that godless policies do not bring peace or rest (Isaiah 28:20).

Because the fathers have eaten sour grapes, the children’s teeth are set on edge (Ezekiel 18:2). This is a graphic way of saying that parental errors are visited on their children.

We use the term *half-baked*, perhaps not realizing this expression fits the prophet’s description of inconsistent Israel. “Ephraim is a cake not turned” (Hosea. 7:8). A cook carelessly forgets to turn a cake that comes out burnt on the bottom and raw on the top. On the one side Israel professed worship of Jehovah; on the other the nation practiced heathen idolatry. The Geneva Bible puts it, “Baked on one side and raw on the other, he is neither through hot nor through cold, but partly a Jew and partly a Gentile.”

Don’t we laugh at the person who puts his change in his pocket and finds it spilling through a hole in his pocket to jangle to the ground? To illustrate that despite prosperity poverty existed, the prophet said, “He that earneth wages, earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes” (Haggai 1:6).

Paul gives us many figures of speech that convey somewhat of a humorous picture. Continuous uninterpreted talking in tongues is like a trumpet giving a few faint-hearted squeaks (I Corinthians 14:8). Some people are always learning but unable to come to the knowledge of the truth (II Timothy 3:7). An amusing metaphor refers to swine that have the scurvy and seek relief for itching ears by rubbing them against stone heaps. They depict people who don’t like sound doctrine so multiply teachers to tickle their fancies, running from one teacher to another (II Timothy 4:3). Is there not something amusing in James’ description of the tongue as his figures of speech range far and wide including bits that turn horses, rudders that swing ships, sparks that set afire, beasts that can’t be tamed, poison that’s deadly, and gushings of sweet and bitter fountains? (James 3:3-11)

## UNDERSTATEMENT

When Luke described the uproar at Ephesus which raged out of control for two hours as “no small stir” (Acts 19:23), it would be like a pilot saying, after dropping a cobalt bomb, “That was no firecracker,” or after flying across the ocean, to say, “That was no mud puddle.”

## IRONY

Who can refrain from smiling at Job’s retort to his so-called friends who, boasting superior knowledge, self-righteously inferred that his troubles resulted from his secret sins? He retorted, “No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you” (Job 12:2). His irony could be expanded, “No doubt the world waited to be taught till you were born. Sole rights to wisdom belong exclusively to you. When you die, wisdom will disappear from off the face of the earth.” Later he calls them “comforters” (Job 16:2). Irony involves an intended meaning opposite to the sense of the words used. Job meant these friends did not comfort him. The expression “Job’s comforters” has become proverbial to describe those who under the guise of comforting give anything but comfort. He also called them “physicians of no value” (Job 13:4), healers who didn’t heal.

Another outstanding example of irony in the Old Testament comes from the message of Amos. "Come to Bethel, and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifices every morning, and your tithes after three years: And offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, and proclaim and publish the free offerings: for this liketh you, O ye children of Israel, saith the Lord God" (Amos 4:4,5).

Ironically, the prophet urges Israel to show their zeal for idolatry and thus increase their guilt. Bethel and Gilgal were linked as centers of idolatrous worship. By bringing daily sacrifices they kept some appearance of regular worship but their service was nevertheless idolatry. The Revised Version reads that Amos states tithes should be brought every three days. In irony the prophet invites them to outdo the law which spoke of bringing tithes every year and the second tithe every third year. By exaggeration he suggests every third day, thereby increasing their apostasy from the true God. In addition, Amos ironically commands them to so increase their zeal that they offer by burning a thank offering of that which was leavened, which would be in direct violation of consuming by fire leaven in any meat offering.

King Herod ironically told the wise men that when they found the baby born King of the Jews they should bring him word again, "that I may come and worship him also" (Matthew 2:8). A comment could be made with irony on Herod's statement – the only way Herod wanted to worship Christ was with the swing of a sword. Because the Jewish leaders had put him on the spot, Pilate spited them with his irony, "Behold your King . . . Shall I crucify your King?" (John 19:14,15). He continued his ironical spite when he wrote the superscription which he would not change, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19).

Paul uses irony to speak of the lowest manifestation of God's wisdom, calling it "the foolishness of God" (I Corinthians 1:25), which is infinitely superior to man's highest wisdom. Later in the epistle Paul wishes to cut the ground from under the boasting of some Corinthian believers, exalting one against the other and pandering to their pride. So he ironically contrasts the vauntings of the Corinthians with his own status as an apostle, saying in effect, "Ye are kings; we are a spectacle. Ye are wise; we are fools. Ye are strong; we are weak. Ye are honored; we are despised, hungry, naked, homeless, reviled, defamed, the off-scouring of all things" (I Corinthians 4:8-13). This ironical contrast between the exalted claims of the Corinthians and the actual abasing experiences of the apostles was designed to teach them humility and unity. One expositor comments, "That the passage is ironical, and even sarcastic, cannot be denied. This is not the only instance in which these weapons are used by the inspired writers. The prophets especially employ them freely in their endeavors to convince the people of the folly of trusting to idols. The propriety of the use of weapons so dangerous depends on the occasion and the motive. If the thing assailed be both wicked and foolish, and if the motive be, not the desire to give pain, but to convince and to convert, their use is justified by Scriptural examples." [8]

## SARCASM

An outstanding example of sarcasm in the Bible is Elijah's mockery of the false prophets of Baal when prayers to their gods to send fire on the sacrifice went unanswered. "And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked" (I Kings 18:27). An oft-repeated question asks if this sarcasm was right or wrong. Admittedly, most sarcasm has a biting sting gleefully delivered with enjoyable malice. Such is forbidden by the law of love, for one element of humor is kindness. But instances may exist when ridicule can be spoken in love. Because ridicule may sometimes cut deeper than severity, like other sharp instruments it demands cautious handling. If Elijah bore no personal malice toward the prophets of Baal, even as Christ had none for the Pharisees, would not Elijah's sarcasm come under the same category as Christ's sinless scorn? Elijah's ridicule, which incidentally contains irony as well, is a rhetorical device to teach in this case that the true and living God could always hear and answer, and was never out on a journey or preoccupied or sleeping.

Isaiah ridicules those who bow down to a god of wood. He says of the idol-worshiper, "He feedeth on ashes" (Isaiah 44:20). From the previous verse we get this picture. The heathen hews down a tree, chops part up for fuel to bake some bread, and with the rest carves a god to worship. The log that he burns and turns to ashes is of the same stuff as the god he bows to. Can a god be burnt up for fuel? If so, can he feed the worshiper with anything better than its ashes?

Likewise, another prophet shows the absurdity of idolatry. The people cut down a tree, deck it with gold and silver ornaments, fasten it together with hammer and nails so that it won't fall over. Fancy having to prop up a god! Unable to speak, this god has to be carried because it can't move itself. Imagine such a helpless god. But the Lord God is great and mighty (Jeremiah 10:3-6).

Roland Hill, an open-air preacher of Whitefield's time, in his sermon "The Displays of Gospel Grace", uses sarcasm to challenge the formal and literary preachers of his day to produce effective

results. After calling their sermons “nicely composed paper-poppuns”, he adds, “I would willingly and gladly carry their stool behind them, to see what sort of figures they would cut, in their attempts to reform. I hate such silly pride, and it is best corrected by the lash of ridicule and contempt.” [9]

## INCONGRUITY IN SITUATIONS

Is there not an element of humor in the way God made man’s body? Proud, boasting, clever man made from the dust of the ground. A general contractor was putting up a new building. When the housewives on the street complained of the dust, he replied, “You came from dust and you’re going to dust. You’d better get used to it!” Do we not smile at the way God made woman by causing a deep sleep to fall on Adam and making her from his side? Luther referred to his wife as “my rib”.

When Lot warned his sons-in-law to flee from Sodom, they laughed at him. Wasn’t he as involved as they? (Genesis 19:14) Reading of Jacob at birth seizing the heel of his older twin Esau elicits a smile especially when we realize this unlikely action typified Jacob’s later acquisitive habits (Genesis 25:26).

Much in the life of Jacob makes us smile, such as hairy garments on his smooth arms to let his blind father think he was Esau. Father Isaac’s reaction, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau” (Genesis 27:22), amuses us though it certainly wasn’t funny to him. We smile to think that Jacob, after working seven years for Rachel, found the morning after the wedding that he had married Leah. Although it was not funny at the moment to Jacob, he could probably look back on it in later years and laugh (Genesis 29: 18-25). The covenant between scheming Jacob and his crooked father-in-law Laban was virtually a pact between thieves, saying in effect, “The Lord watch between us while absent from each other that we do not play tricks on each other” (Genesis 31:48, 49).

The craft of the Gibeonites is laughable. Wearing old shoes and garments and carrying dry, moldy bread, they pretended to have come from a distance and thus successfully made a league with the Israelites who didn’t realize they lived as close as they did (Joshua 9:3-27).

The inability of the trapped Ephraimites to pronounce the word “river”, framing it *sibboleth* instead of *shibboleth*, has its humorous overtones (Judges 12:6). We picture them trying to pass themselves off as Gileadites but being caught by their own speech. In another vein, the word *shibboleth* has passed into our language to indicate a pet phrase, test doctrine, or minor peculiarity which has become the test of orthodoxy, often giving rise to bitter bigotry. The mere difference of one “h” rules people outside the inner circle.

We smile at Saul’s inconsistency between his words and his deeds. Commanded to slay all animals of the Amalekites, he returns from battle to say to Samuel, “I have performed the commandment of the Lord.” Then Samuel asks, “What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?” (I Samuel 15:13,14) Though pitiable when walk does not back up talk, there is an element of humor in such incongruity. We would smile at a teacher who said, “Don’t say *ain’t*, for it ain’t right.” Or at the professor who advised, “Never end your sentence with a preposition, especially the word *with*. *With* is a bad word to end a sentence *with*.” Or at a father who whipped his boy for swearing but who as the whip slipped hit himself so that he swore.

Amusing, yet how true to life, is the pouting of a grown man, King Ahab, who although he already possessed great territory, sulked like a child and refused to eat because he couldn’t get his own way with Naboth who refused to sell him his vineyard (I Kings 21:4).

Rather ludicrous is the concern of the leaders of Persia who because King Ahasuerus was defied by Queen Vashti, worried lest their wives would disobey them. How incongruous that the strong men of Persia should be cowed by their wives (Esther 1:13-19).

We smile at Peter’s instability. At one moment he walks on the water; the next he is sinking. He says to Jesus, “You won’t wash my feet.” In a few moments he changes his tune, “Not my feet only but also my hands and my head.” At one hour he vowed to Jesus, “I’ll never deny you. I’ll die for you.” Before the night was over he had denied three times that he ever knew Jesus, at least once with an oath. Someone likened Peter to a teen-age girl going steady. Perhaps he was similar to the girl who penciled her boyfriend this note, “Dear Joe, I do not like you. Love, Mary.”

The people of Jericho must have laughed when they saw Zacchaeus scrap his dignity and climb a tree to see Jesus (Luke 19:4). Perhaps it was funny to the people in the crowded house where the Master was teaching, when because they could not make an entrance the normal way four men broke open the roof to let a paralytic down in front of Jesus (Mark 2:1-4). Amusing is the anger of the ten disciples at James and John for wanting top billing in the kingdom, for the ten wanted that spot for themselves, like the little boy who said to his sister, “You’re selfish; you took the last apple and I wanted it!” Absurd is the excuse given by the elders to the guards to explain the empty tomb, “His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept (Matthew 28:12,13). We can’t help

thinking, "If someone steals from you while you're sleeping, how can you tell with closed eyes who the thief was?"

When Peter just released from prison hurried, to the home where the church was praying, is it not humorous that Rhoda, the servant, learning who was at the door left him standing outside while she rushed inside with the news? (Acts 12:13, 14) During Paul's sermon at Troas a young man fell asleep and fell quite a distance. Had he not been all right, it would have been a tragedy (Acts 20:9-11). We smile at people falling asleep in church. One pastor even warned the people not to snore lest they wake up the deacons. How farcical was Bernice's pompous entrance to the court hearing of Paul where her husband Agrippa was guest of honor (Acts 25:23). Perhaps she reminds us of a peacock stretching its feathers. However, the peacock has natural glory whereas Bernice's was assumed and empty.

Paul pointed out the inconsistency of preaching one thing and practicing another. He spoke of the one who taught against stealing, but who himself stole; also of the one who spoke against adultery but who was guilty of the same (Romans 2:21,22). A chemistry teacher gave a lecture on the relation of cancer to cigarettes and concluded with a warning against smoking, then as he left the class lit up a cigarette. A pen salesman, after extolling the virtues of his particular brand of pen and how he could never be without one, was given an order which he proceeded to fill in with a pencil. The existence of moral incongruities places humor as a weapon in the arsenal of the reformer.

How ridiculous for saints to go before earthly judges to settle matters when someday the saints will judge the world. In irony Paul suggests they select the least esteemed saint in the church, for he would be more fit to judge than non-Christian judges (1 Corinthians 6:1-4). In his analogy of the church to a human body Paul portrays a humorous possibility when he asks, "If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing where were the smelling?" (1 Corinthians 12:17) Just imagine the whole body all eyes or all ears!

How comical for a lady to look in the mirror in the morning, note her face smeared with cold cream and her hair in curlers, then proceed to her office to work without washing. How laughable for a man to look in the mirror the first thing in the morning, see his heavy beard, then hurry to work without shaving. Yet James speaks of people who look into the mirror and go their way forgetting what manner of people they are (James 1:23,24). Such a practice isn't basically different from the African lady who looked into a mirror for the first time, insisted on buying it, then smashed it to pieces, exclaiming, "There, I won't look like that anymore!"

The inconsistency of snobbery is painted in a vivid scene, doubtless based on fact. An assembly room is full. There's a commotion near the back. The door opens. In steps a distinguished man, a wealthy merchant, dressed in costly clothes with a gold ring on his finger. Immediately the usher moves in his direction and ostentatiously leads him to a choice seat. Moments later the door opens again. This time it's a timid slave, whose clothes are soiled and shabby. No one moves for a while. Then the usher conducts him to an inconspicuous corner by someone's footstool. Such discrimination is wrong (James 2:1-4).

A lady cleaned up her pig with warm water and soapsuds. She gave him a good scrubbing. Then putting a blue ribbon around his neck, she led her pig to the city. White skin, blue ribbon, pink nose – what a lovely pig he was. All went well till the pig spied a puddle of mud. Then he was off, wallowing in the mire. This humorous picture Peter paints in brief, "The sow that was washed [is turned] to her wallowing in the mire" (II Peter 2:22). The dictatorial bossiness of Diotrephes draws a smile from those who have met his counterpart in modern church life (III John 9, 10).

## ODDITY IN SYMBOLISM

In its broadest sense humor includes the odd or the strange. "Strange As It May Seem" and "Believe It or Not" were titles of newspaper features which might have told of a dentist whose name was Dr. Yank or of a license plate on a hearse lettered "U-2".

Both a prophet's message and his teaching method often contain some element of oddity.

Seven thin ears of corn ate up seven fat ears of corn, and seven thin cows devoured seven fat ones, all of which taught that seven years of famine would consume the plenteous harvest of seven good years (Genesis 41:17,29-31).

If Daniel's image (Daniel 2) were painted on canvas, the result would be somewhat grotesque: head of fine gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of iron, feet of iron and clay. Other visions present similarly weird combinations such as a lion with eagles' wings (Daniel 7:4), a leopard with four wings of a fowl and four heads (Daniel 7:6), a dreadful beast with iron teeth, ten horns and nails of brass, out of whose horns came up a little horn with eyes like a man and a mouth speaking great things (Daniel 7:7,8), four chariots with red, black, white and grisled and bay horses coming from between two brass mountains (Zechariah 6:1-3), a beast out of the sea with seven heads, ten horns

on which were ten crowns, like a leopard with bear's feet and lion's mouth (Revelation 13:1,2), and another beast out of the earth with two horns like a lamb but a mouth like a dragon (Revelation 13:11).

Visual aids are not a modern innovation when we consider how some Old Testament prophets communicated their message. Zedekiah made horns of iron to back up his proclamation, "With these shalt thou push the Syrians, until thou have consumed them" (1 Kings 22:11). Jeremiah put yokes of wood on his neck to demonstrate to Judah that she would come under the yoke of Babylon (Jeremiah 27:2). Hosea was commanded to marry a harlot to show God's love for wayward Israel (Hosea 1-3). Ezekiel drew a model of Jerusalem and a siege against it on tile of soft clay, even using an iron pan as a fence from behind which the enemy would shoot arrows. Then the prophet had to lie on his side 390 days to depict their years of punishment. The New Testament tells how Agabus tried to dissuade Paul from traveling to Jerusalem by taking Paul's girdle and binding his own hands and feet as an object lesson of what would happen to Paul (Acts 21:10-12).

## SUDDEN REVERSALS

Joseph suffered two years of unjust imprisonment because of false charges brought by Potiphar's wife. Suddenly through the memory of a former prison pal, Joseph was called to interpret Pharaoh's dream which had baffled all the wise men. Successfully making the meaning clear, he was exalted to second in command of all Egypt. His friends, as well as Joseph, must have been gleefully delighted at this rapid turn of events. We smile at the probable bewilderment of Potiphar and his wife, who came under his rule (Genesis 41:39-44).

Miriam openly slandered her brother Moses, leader of the Israelites, murmuring, "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us?" Meek Moses made no defense, but the Lord acted on his behalf. Suddenly Miriam was stricken with leprosy which lasted seven days. At one minute she asserted herself equal to Moses; the next minute she was a leper excommunicated from the camp (Numbers 12).

Absalom's crowning glory was his hair (II Samuel 14:26). Yet his glorious hair caused his death when it caught in the limbs of a great oak. His mule went out from under him, leaving him hanging, an easy target for enemy arrows (II Samuel 18:9). Perhaps it should be repeated that tragedy is involved in most of these sudden reversals, but it is the humorous inextricably woven into the event that now interests us.

Hunted, harassed and hounded, exiled David fled with King Saul pursuing, and more than once was almost cornered. On two occasions David crept into the camp of Saul on whom God had sent deep sleep. In perfect position to slay Saul, David on one occasion cut off the skirt of Saul's robe, and on the other took Saul's spear and bottle of water. We smile at this sudden reversal, as well as at David's message to Saul, "Behold the king's spear and let one of the young men come over and fetch it" (I Samuel 24:1-11;26).

The sudden emergence of Mordecai from underdog to top man with the accompanying reversal of mean Haman's fortunes never fails to amuse when the story of Esther is told. A congregation can react from a smile to a loud laugh when just before the final catastrophe of Haman hanging on his own gallows, the capricious monarch asked, "What shall be done to the man the king delights to honor?" Not realizing the king has just discovered that he owes something to Mordecai for saving his life a few years back, and thinking himself the king's favorite, Haman suggested a royal program which included the king's own horse, robe and crown, with a princely herald to proclaim his high estate. Then came the word that must have floored Haman and made spectators roar with laughter. "Yes," the king replied, "that's what should be done. Carry out your suggestions right away, and you be the prince who honors Mordecai!" (Esther 6). Haman learned that a halo a few inches lower becomes a noose.

We cannot help being amused at the proud Syrians who, in coming to capture God's prophet Elisha, were smitten with blindness and were then led along by Elisha, the very one they sought, who said, "This is not the way, neither is this the city: follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom ye seek" (II Kings 6:19). But instead he led them into enemy territory, asked the Lord to open their eyes, then fed them and sent them home.

The Philippian magistrates who had Paul beaten and imprisoned sent their subordinates to tell Paul and Silas to go. But Paul replied that the magistrates had wrongfully beaten them since he and Silas were Roman citizens and uncondemned, adding, "Let them come themselves and fetch us out" (Acts 16:37). Worried and fearful because these prisoners were Roman citizens, the magistrates came in person and begged Paul and Silas to leave. There is something funny in this reversal of position as Paul makes them come down off their high horse.

These incidents of sudden reversal bear out God's promise to humble the haughty and exalt the lowly.

To this point illustrations of humor in the Bible have revolved about play on words in both Old and New Testament; incongruity in ideas including understatement, irony and sarcasm; and the unusual in

situations including oddity in symbolism and sudden reversals. The final two categories in the chapter gather together several more situations which possess incongruity but which also teach two important truths, the foolishness of doubting God and the silliness of serving sin.

### **THE FOOLISHNESS OF DOUBTING GOD**

A large department store decided to honor its millionth customer. She was congratulated by the store's manager, photographed by reporters and interviewed on radio. Then she was loaded down with free merchandise costing thousands of dollars. After the fanfare finished, she proceeded to her original destination – the complaint desk.

How like God's people in all ages. After the great demonstration of God's power in slaying the first-born of Egypt, the Israelites murmured when it seemed that the Egyptians would overtake them, "For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness" (Exodus 14:12). Then God opened the Red Sea for them to safely cross, and lowered the waters in disaster on the pursuing Egyptians, causing the Israelites to sing and dance. But three days later, the same people who sang, murmured at the Lord because the waters were bitter. How ridiculous that they could forget His power! Could not He who parted the waters also sweeten waters? (Exodus 15:24) After God did sweeten the water, they murmured because they had no bread (Exodus 16:3). After receiving God's blessings they proceeded to the complaint desk.

How ridiculous it was to doubt God's power! From our perspective, the ten spies who feared the giants of the Amalekites and advised against going up to take the promised land, put themselves in a ridiculous light. Rather than thinking themselves grasshoppers in comparison to the Amalekites, they should have laughed with God who saw the Amalekites as grasshoppers in His almighty sight (Numbers 13:26-33). Likewise, the whole nation should never have murmured when these spies gave their report, wishing themselves back in Egypt. How easily they forgot God's glory and miracles (Numbers 14:22). Despite His countless bounties they had been to the complaint desk many times.

Likewise we smile at Elijah's lack of faith when after his great victory over the false prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel, he flees for his life, then prays that he might die, lamenting that he alone is left true to the Lord (I Kings 19:1-10).

More than once our Lord called His disciples fools. How incongruous for them to be afraid in the storm with Christ aboard, for had they not seen His power over disease, demons and death? On the resurrection afternoon He called the Emmaus disciples "Fools and slow of heart to believe." How absurd that His enemies so believed His teaching on the resurrection that they asked for a guard and a seal to make the tomb sure, whereas His own who had heard Him repeatedly teach His resurrection failed to believe in the fact of His rising, thinking such reports idle tales. One writer spoke of His appearance in "the upper room where were gathered the fools who were formerly His disciples."

We smile at Africans who bring umbrellas to a service where they pray for rain. In reality, they should smile at us for not bringing umbrellas when we pray for rain. The Early Church prayed for Peter's release from prison. When through the mighty power of God he was released from his chains, then passed through open iron gates and hurried to Mary's house where the church had been imploring God all night, we are astounded to learn that the church didn't believe he was released. They had been praying for this very thing, but insisted it was his ghost. How like human nature! We are surprised when God answers our prayers.

### **THE SILLINESS OF SERVING SIN**

There is the incongruity of Esau selling his birthright for a mess of pottage (Genesis 25:31-33). An office boy who resisted becoming a Christian was told by his boss that when Christ returned he could have the entire business. The boy beamed with almost uncontrollable joy till it dawned on him that Christ's return meant the end of possible forgiveness and a time of judgment. What good would the office be? Yet people sell Christ for paltry things, even thirty pieces of silver.

Imagine a man in pain, begging for relief from suffering who when asked, "When would you like relief?" replies "Tomorrow!" Yet Pharaoh begged the plague of frogs to be removed, and when asked when he would like the frogs to go, answered, "Tomorrow" (Exodus 8:8-10). After each plague stopped, Pharaoh hardened his heart and went on his former stubborn way. He was like the sailor praying in the storm, then resuming his cussing when the storm subsided. In fact, even after the death of the first-born and his permission to let Israel go, he changed his mind (Exodus 14:5-9). How little he realized that his decision would lead to the destruction of his army in the Red Sea. If we could see as God sees, we might momentarily smile (with compassion) on sinners who despite divine warnings persist in folly. Folly today means silliness, but is related linguistically to sin.

According to one authority, Samson furnishes the chief example of incongruity in the Bible. He killed a lion bare-handed, caught three hundred foxes, tied them tail to tail and set fire to their tails,

smote the Philistines with a great slaughter, ripped off cords that bound his arms, slew a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass, tore down the gate of a city, pulled down the pillars of a house, yet acted the fool before the wiles of Delilah and died a blind prisoner (Judges 14:16). Here is the disharmony of a physical giant proving himself a moral pygmy.

It is ironic the way David traps himself after the story the prophet Nathan tells. David had taken another man's wife and indirectly murdered her husband. In the story Nathan told of a rich man with plenty of lambs taking a poor man's sole little ewe lamb. In flashing anger David ordered the rich man's death. Nathan pointed out, "Thou art the man!" (1 Samuel 12:1-8). Sin makes us blind to our faults.

How ridiculous to follow the path of sin whose wage is death! Prosperity now will give way to poverty later. The prophet warned the well-dressed and ornamented ladies who wore chains, bracelets, bonnets, earrings, nose jewels, rings and several changes of garments. They were to be stripped of these things. Instead of perfume there would be smell; instead of a belt, a rope; instead of well-set hair, baldness; instead of a robe, sackcloth; instead of beauty, branding (Isaiah 3:16-24).

How absurd for Pilate to think that sin could be erased by washing his hands in a bowl of water (Matthew 27:24).

Would we not consider it somewhat comical if a mathematics professor couldn't add five plus five. Yet Nicodemus, master in Israel and learned member of the Sanhedrin, did not know elemental spiritual truth (John 3:10). The natural man needs the touch of the Spirit of God to make him understand spiritual truth. This explains why the learned scribes strove among themselves in puzzlement at things Jesus said. They who pretend to know much become a laughing-stock because they know little.

A fool is basically a person who has missed the proportion of things. He puts secondary things first and makes major matters minor. He lays up great treasure on earth where he will live for only a short time – whereas he sends on ahead no riches to the place where he will dwell forever.

The angels from their thrones on high  
Look down on us with wondering eye;  
That we who are but passing guests,  
Build such strong and sturdy nests;  
And where we hope to live for aye,  
Scarce take time a stone to lay.

– Author Unknown

The fool takes no time for his eternal soul but squanders his time, energies and talents on fleeting, fading vanities. Is not a man a fool even though he gains the world but loses his own soul?

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 6

- 1 Arthur T. Pierson, *Knowing the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, reprint edition), p. 437.
- 2 Arthur B. Fowler, in private correspondence, June 1959.
- 3 Donald Grey Barnhouse, *God's Remedy* (Philadelphia: Bible Study Hour, 1950), p. 312.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 316, 517.
- 5 Pierson, *op. cit.*, p. 438.
- 6 Fowler, *op. cit.*
- 7 Jewett, *op. cit.*
- 8 Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 71.
- 9 Hill, *op. cit.*, pp. 237, 238.

## CHAPTER 7

### The Humor of Jesus

Suppose you saw a man walking down the street with a telephone pole protruding from one of his eyes. Coming toward him is another man who has in one of his eyes a speck so small you can hardly discern it. Then you hear the man with the pole in his eye begin to criticize the fellow with the speck in his, "You've got a sliver in your eye! You shouldn't walk around with the speck in your eye. You won't be able to see where you're going. Better let me pull it out!" All the time he is finding fault, a telephone pole projects from his eye. Wouldn't you smile, perhaps even laugh, at the inconsistency?

This is a picture Jesus drew in the Sermon on the Mount. "And why beholdest thou the mote [stubble, splinter, chaff, small dry thing] that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam [spar of timber, piece of lumber, pole] that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (Matthew 7:3-5). Certainly those listening must have smiled.

That Jesus used humor may come as a surprise to some. For several reasons we do not readily recognize His humor. In the first place, when we read the words of Christ, our solemn mood looks for values different from humor. Second, if what one generation laughs at is not regarded as funny by the next, appreciation of the incongruity of situations which existed 1900 years ago may not be easily grasped. Psychological reorientation to the first century scene may be required before we can enter into some of Jesus' humor. Finally, some never find humor in Jesus' teaching because they claim, "Jesus never laughed. In fact, there is no record that He even smiled. He was a Man of Sorrows."

Because the gospels fail to mention the smiles and laughs of Jesus does not mean He did neither, for they give incomplete snatches of His life. Only thirty-five days of his entire thirty-three years are mentioned. This would be an average of less than one out of every thirty days of his three-year ministry. Then, just fragments of these days are usually given. Because only a small fraction of His work appears in the four gospels John ends his evangel, "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written" (John 21:25). If a full record existed, it seems inevitable that we would read of His smiles and laughs. His perpetual solemnity cannot be proved. It should never be forgotten that He was a man of joys as well as a man of sorrows. He wished that His joy would be ours. He must have entered into the joys of people. Though undoubtedly the shadow of the cross enveloped His ministry with a solemnity of purpose, the gospels picture Him as optimistic and serene. He attended a wedding in Cana where to relieve the embarrassment of the host at the lack of sufficient refreshments He performed His initial miracle. Often He resorted to the relaxed atmosphere of the home in Bethany and fellowship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. In the parable He tells of the prodigal son, the father makes merry at the return of his wayward lad, which gives insight into the divine character as having a place for lightheartedness, despite the gloomy opinions of the elder brothers of theology.

Says the poet about how Christ is seen in the Christian,

Not merely by the words you say,  
Not only in your deeds confessed  
But in the most unconscious way  
Is Christ expressed.

Is it a beatific smile?  
A holy light upon your brow?  
Oh, no – I felt His presence while  
You laughed just now. [1]

Though the Scripture mentions no laugh of Jesus, it clearly records several statements which must have sounded funny to His hearers. Nor is this strange. Since wit is related to wisdom by its perception of the incongruous, it should not be surprising to find examples of wit in the teachings of Him who is Wisdom personified. Since He knew Truth in all its consistency, He would be quick to note any inconsistency. Besides, if humor can be utilized as a teaching device, would not the Master Teacher employ this method from time to time? One writer puts it, "From the record of Scripture, Christ is never known to have laughed aloud but a great deal that He did and said is imbued with transposed laughter

as He deals in His unique saving way with the inadequacies of his friends and the enmity of His adversaries.” [2]

Humor not only laughs at things misshapen or absurd but protests against them. Jesus threw into comic relief some of the moral inconsistencies of His day that they might be seen in their proper perspective, corrected and avoided by others. The German critic, Lessing, said, “The whole of morality has no more powerful and effective preservative than the laughable.” [3]

The following examples include humor in its broadest ranges. Like both the prophet Isaiah and the Apostle Paul, the Lord seems to make a play on words on a few occasions. For example, proceeding on the pedagogical principle from the known to the unknown, He called the fishermen, Peter and Andrew, to discipleship with the command, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). This is a play on the ideas of fishing for fish and fishing for men. A parallel account words it differently but also with a play on the same idea. Those who had been catching fish were told, “Henceforth thou shalt catch men” (Luke 5: 10). Most congregations today will yield a slight smile when the difference between the two kinds of fishing is explained: A fisherman catches live fish which then die, whereas a soul winner captures men who are dead in sin but who come alive spiritually.

A hearse containing a casket drives down a cemetery road toward an open grave. To your amazement you note the driver is dead. A dead man burying another dead man! This is the picture Jesus’ words conjure up to modern readers at the words, “Let the dead bury their dead” (Matthew 8:22). However, His play on words infers that many people are walking around spiritually dead, who at times may even assist in the burial of the physically dead. A preacher once led an undertaker to become a Christian through this verse.

Jesus’ humor seems to have been directed at times toward His disciples, sometimes toward His enemies, and again toward the indifferent. In most cases, the samples in each category follow the usually accepted chronological order of His ministry.

## FOIBLES OF HIS FOLLOWERS

Nicknames are often humorously revealing. When the Saviour first saw Simon he was anything but stable. His oscillating, vacillating character flared up time and time again in his association with the Lord. Yet Jesus called him *Peter*, a rock, stable, firm. One can almost see bystanders who knew Peter well snicker at that name, ironically just the opposite to his real nature. Of course, our Lord saw him for what he would become.

In choosing His twelve disciples the Saviour gave the brothers James and John the surname “Boanerges” which means “Sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). That this name fitted became evident later when James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans who wouldn’t receive Jesus (Luke 9:54). The name apparently didn’t stick for it is otherwise unmentioned in the Bible. Why was it given? The Expositor’s Greek Testament suggests, “It may have been an innocent pleasantry in a society of free, unrestrained fellowship, hitting off some *peculiarity* of the brothers.”

Would it not be funny if a housewife bought a new bedroom table lamp, but instead of putting it on a table, placed it in a closed drawer, or under the bed, then flicked on the switch? To show that Christians ought to let their influence shine, Jesus illustrated, “Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house” (Matthew 5:15). Yet some professing believers never witness for their Lord at work, school, play, home or neighborhood.

How prone Christians are to worry. Jesus painted the incongruous picture of birds sowing in the spring, reaping in the fall, then binding the sheaves together and storing them in barns (Matthew 6:26). Can’t you just see a sparrow running a threshing machine! How much better than birds are God’s children! Children don’t worry whether or not their parents will feed and clothe them. They don’t sit moping around a playground asking, “Will I have anything to eat for supper tonight? Will my folks give me any food?” To reinforce the absurdity of God’s children failing to trust their Heavenly Father, Jesus asked, “What man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?” (Matthew 7:9,10)

Failure to forgive is a foible of human nature. To show the inconsistency of a Christian’s unforgiving spirit, our Lord Jesus Christ spoke of a servant who owed his master ten thousand talents. After the debt was compassionately canceled the servant who had one hundred pence owed him by a fellow servant mercilessly refused to grant extension of credit and threw the debtor into prison. Our Lord’s use of exaggeration is thrown into clearer relief when we translate the sums of money into our coinage. The servant who was forgiven twelve million dollars refused to forgive a debt of seventeen dollars. To use rounder figures, we could say Christ contrasted debts of ten million dollars and ten dollars! By this gross disparity He taught that when forgiven our great debt against God we should show mercy to our fellow creatures whose wrongs against us are small by comparison.

Picture the manager of a large business who is dismissed. In the week before his dismissal takes effect he writes to many companies who owe his company money and while still in authority reduces their debts anywhere from twenty to fifty per cent. He does this so that when he is unemployed they will treat him kindly. Though disagreeing with his ethics, we would smile at his ingenuity. Our Lord gave such a story in which, by commending the manager's zeal, not his dishonesty, He points out that the children of this world are wiser than Christians in their initiative and industry (Luke 16:1-13).

In the parable of the pounds Jesus related that the third servant hid his pound in a napkin (Luke 19:20). Amusingly enough, the word "napkin" meant a sweat-rag for wiping perspiration off the face. He chose a word that involved sweat in connection with a man avoiding work. The inconsistency with laziness is emphasized by use of a word inferring labor.

Though some may disagree, may there not be a tinge of humor in the way the risen Christ appeared to the Emmaus disciples on the afternoon of the resurrection? Two disciples walk on the road engaged in animated controversy. They are discussing all the events of the weekend, the crucifixion and reports of the resurrection, when Jesus joins them. Though they know Him well, they do not recognize Him. Jesus asks, "What are you talking about? And why are you sad?" Says the Expositor's Greek Testament, "The question of the stranger quietly put to the two wayfarers is not without a touch of kindly humor." Recovering from surprise at interruption of their conversation by a stranger, they ask, "You must be a stranger not to know the supreme subject of the hour." Then Jesus asks in effect, "What subject?" Is there not another touch of humor when the very subject they have been discussing stands before them and they fail to recognize Him. Moreover, He walks miles with them still unrecognized till finally He makes Himself known in the breaking of bread in their home.

Is it unlikely to suppose that when relating this episode in later months and years they would not only confess their deep chagrin, but would also appreciate the humor of the situation? "And to think that we were talking about Him all those miles He walked with us and we didn't know Him!"

The noted Bible expositor, G. Campbell Morgan, remarked on this episode, "There is a tender and beautiful playfulness in the way He dealt with these men. Humor is as divine as pathos, and I cannot study the life of Jesus without finding humor there." [4]

## FAULTS OF HIS FOES

Trying to appear what one is not is a common moral fault in adults as well as in children. Numerous comedies have been penned on this theme. In his dialogue *Philebus*, Plato describes this human weakness as a vice involving the opposite of the condition mentioned in the inscription at Delphi, which was to "know thyself". At a Hallowe'en party we would laugh at a grocer who dressed up as a knight, or a carpenter disguised as Napoleon. The word "hypocrite" comes from two words which mean "playing the part under a disguise". Much of Jesus' humor struck out at the pretensions of the Pharisees.

Ushers are passing the offering-plate in the Sunday morning service. The organ is playing. Suddenly a man sitting next to the aisle stands up, pulls a trumpet out from under his coat and blares out three staccato blasts. Everyone looks around in time to see him ostentatiously drop a ten-dollar bill on the plate. Jesus advised, "When thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets" (Matthew 6:2).

Eidersheim's suggestion, though not as widely accepted an explanation as the above, is that trumpet-shaped boxes were used in the temple treasury which the ostentatious would strike with their coin so people could note their generosity.

Clowns and tramps draw laughs because of their grotesquely-patched clothes. To defend His disciples for feasting instead of fasting like John the Baptist's disciples, our Lord said that for His disciples to mourn while He the Bridegroom was present was as inconsistent as cutting out a piece of new cloth to patch a hole in an old garment. The effect would be absurd. Not only would the old garment look funny, but the new cloth would have a hole in it (Luke 5:36).

Our Lord gave us the amusing description of wolves parading in sheep's wool (Matthew 7:15). Wouldn't it likewise be absurd to find oranges on apple trees, or raspberries on poison ivy plants? Transposed to modern setting this is the idea of, "Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" (Matthew 7:16)

There is an element of humor as well as pathos in our Lord's description of the religious leaders of His day as blind leaders of the blind, with both guide and follower blindly falling into a hole in the ground (Matthew 15:14). How inconsistent for those same leaders to be able to tell the weather but to miss the signs of the time! They could exhibit shrewd powers of observation in the natural sphere but were extremely dull in the spiritual (Matthew 16:3).

A preacher declared in his sermon, "You don't have to be in *Who's Who* to know what's what." The congregation chuckled. Yet Jesus expressed the same thought when He said, "I thank thee, O Father .

. . . that thou didst hide these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Luke 10:21). The simple disciples had more wisdom than the know-it-all Pharisees.

A missionary on furlough was reprimanded by his hostess one Sunday afternoon for using his portable typewriter to answer correspondence on the Sabbath. An hour later the missionary found his hostess writing a letter by pen. We smile at her inconsistency. Probably Jesus' hearers smiled when He pointed out to those who objected to His healing on the Sabbath a woman who had been sick for eighteen years, "Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering? And ought not this woman . . . whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?" (Luke 13:15,16) And later, "Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day?" (Luke 14:5)

Who can fail to catch the irony in Jesus' question when about to be stoned, "Many good works have I shewed you from my Father; for which of those works do ye stone me?" (John 10:32) Irony is obvious when He called Herod a fox (Luke 13:32), and when He called Gentile rulers "benefactors" (Luke 22:25). One tyrant had even incorporated the word "benefactor" as a title along with his name but Jesus' listeners knew how utterly false was this high-sounding title.

Jesus pictured a guest at a wedding haughtily, pompously and ostentatiously taking the most important seat. Later, when a more honorable guest arrived, the host was forced to ask the first guest to vacate his place of honor. Others would undoubtedly laugh under their breath as in embarrassment he slid into a less important chair. The parable taught that those who exalted themselves would be abased (Luke 14:8-11).

Jesus' hearers must have smiled at His take-off of a Pharisee going up to the temple to pray, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess" (Luke 18:11,12). The foibles of self-righteousness have their amusing modern counterpart. Wouldn't we smile at a Sunday school teacher who after teaching a lesson on the Pharisee and the publican said, "Now, class, let's thank God that we are not like this Pharisee!"

One element of humor, the superiority factor, enjoys the discomfiture of those in authority. When Jesus scorched the scribes and Pharisees during the last week of His earthly ministry, His hearers doubtless reacted with smiles and possibly laughs, at His descriptions of their inconsistencies. Inwardly, and even likely outwardly, they laughed at these self-righteous pretenders. Imagine a housewife cleaning only the outside of the dish, leaving all the food particles on the inside and setting the table for the next meal with dishes dirty on the inside. Many other humorous comparisons as well, fell from the lips of the Saviour (Matthew 23:24, 26).

## FOLLY OF THE FAITHLESS

Who would build a mansion on the sand at the beach or the Empire State Building on quicksand? Yet people build their lives on the shifting sands of man's speculations instead of on obedience to Christ's wisdom (Matthew 7:26,27).

Our Lord spoke of the rich fool who, when his harvest increased, tore down his barns to build bigger ones and said to his soul, "Take thine ease. Eat, drink and be merry." Jesus indicated he was acting foolishly, because in thinking he had forever to live, he laid up treasures on earth. When the divine summons came for his soul that night, he had no riches in the land beyond (Luke 12:16-21).

Any preacher who explains the parable of the great supper will make his audience smile at the absurdity of the excuses offered by those turning the invitation down. The first man begged off with the excuse that he had purchased a piece of ground. Who goes to examine his property after the deal is closed and in the darkness? The second man pled, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them." Who waits till after buying animals to try them out? They might be lame or dead. The third man excused himself because he had just married. No wife becomes boss so soon after marriage! At any rate, Jesus used these excuses to show on what flimsy grounds men reject God's great invitation to salvation (Luke 14:16-24).

A much-visited tourist site in Toronto, Canada, is a chateau which the owner never fully completed. Though the outside was finished, both he and his bank lost all their money before the interior was done. However, the government has since finished the project, sometimes known as "Pellatt's folly", after the man who dreamed it up. Our Lord told a story of a man who started to build a tower without first counting the cost. The result was just the foundation, the rest uncompleted, so that people began "to poke fun at him" (A. T. Robertson's translation). He gave this parable to reinforce the necessity of counting the cost before rushing into discipleship (Luke 14:27-39).

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24). Commentators have tampered with the expression, "eye of a needle," suggesting, among other interpretations, that it may mean the gate to Jerusalem. Many

scholars believe that to whittle its meaning down in any way minimizes the incongruity Jesus meant to convey. If so, this is another example of His humor. Can't you just see a camel with its big humps trying to squirm its way through the eye of a needle?

There is humor in the way Christ led the religious leaders to admit their wickedness in rejecting God's prophets and Himself. He told them the parable of the householder who let his vineyard out to husbandmen, then at harvest time sent first of all servants, then his son to collect the fruits. After relating how the husbandmen stoned the servants and killed the heir, Jesus asked, "What will the householder do to those husbandmen?" Without realizing they were pronouncing their own judgment, the chief priests and elders immediately replied, "He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons" (Matthew 21:41). A few minutes later it dawned on the chief priests Jesus had been speaking of them. Bystanders must have chuckled at the way Jesus objectively projected into clearer relief the religious leaders' iniquity to which they were subjectively blind.

Do we not laugh when friends tell us how they ran out of gas on a trip? Would we not be amused if someone told us how they made elaborate preparations for a vacation, packed the car the night before and rose early to start, only to find there was no gas in the tank, with no near-by stations opening for at least three hours? Jesus told the story of the five foolish virgins who took no oil for their lamps and missed the wedding party. We call them foolish because what they did was ridiculous. But people today are just as foolish who neglect to prepare for Christ's coming.

Jesus used humor. Since humor is integrally wrapped up with human nature, He who knew what was in man could not fail to employ it. Because wit and wisdom are closely allied, He who was all truth would be capable of wit. Inasmuch as a principal factor in humor is the ridiculous or absurd, wit served as an excellent vehicle to expose the inconsistencies of religious hypocrites. Since humor sometimes spotlights truth, the Master Pedagogue would naturally use it.

Hastings' remark summarizes this well. "He is a man speaking to men in the language of men; and pathos, contrast humor and spontaneity are the natural and pleasant marks of that language. A smile is felt in His words, as in the words of all who see contradiction without loss of inner peace." [5]

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 7

1 Beatrice Cleland, "Indwelt," from *The Spirit of Life* by Tom Rees. Used by permission of Moody Press.

2 John W. Duddington, "The Conclusive Laughter of God," in *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1959, p. 13.

3 James Sully, *An Essay on Laughter* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1902), p. 412.

4 G. Carrell Merger, *The Gospel According to Luke* (New York: Revolt, 1931), p. 277.

5 Hastings, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 761.

## CHAPTER 8

### God's Final Laughter

The well-known evangelist, Walter "Happy" MacDonald, formerly a comedian, was converted through a sermon on the text, "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh" (Psalms 2:4).

At first sight a strange verse, this text teaches that, despite the most extensive and strenuous preparations of the vastest international confederacies to defeat God's purposes and strike down His servants, God is not worried. On the contrary, He laughs. Though nations rage and take counsel together against the Lord, the omnipotent Sovereign holds them in derision. Interestingly enough, the translation of the words "take counsel together" in Russian is *soviet*. [1] Though finite, feeble, puny people *soviet* against the Lord, He smilingly counts them as a drop in a bucket, the small dust of the balance, grasshoppers and stubble in a tornado (Isaiah 40:15,22,24). God derides their impotence as though with a squirt gun they would liquidate the stars, or by a push of the hand would roll the sun off the sky.

This laugh of God springs from His infinite superiority, the conclusive finality of His might, and the methods by which He effects His judgments. In an entirely different strain of thought there is the divine laugh of grace, when those who deserve punishment incongruously receive pardon. Because of God's laughter His people can laugh with God.

#### LAUGH OR SUPERIORITY

One element of humor, according to a previous chapter, is a sense of superiority. A feeling of eminence at the inferiority of others causes glee. Because of His infinite perfections God can laugh at any mere dust-made men who fling a challenge at His person.

How absurd for man to think he can escape the presence of God. Jonah, earnest in his misconception that he could escape God, fled to Joppa where he paid the fare for a boat trip to Tarshish, an expensive ticket because his destination, farthest point westward then known, was called the Gates of Hercules, the edge of the world. But he couldn't escape God, who sent a storm, then a private yacht in the form of a big fish to bring him back. If a person ascends up into heaven, descends into the depths of the earth, or takes the wings of the morning to dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, behold God is there! Chateaufort, keeper of the seals for France's King Louis XIII, had been taught faith in God from early youth. When only nine years of age, he was ridiculed by a scoffing, unbelieving nobleman who taunted, "I'll give you an orange if you will tell me where God is."

Replied the boy, "I'll give you two oranges if you will tell me where God is not."

One day the phone rang in the rectory of a large Canadian church that the Queen of England was tentatively scheduled to attend on her Canadian tour. The voice asked, "Can you tell me if you expect the Queen to be in the cathedral this Sunday?"

"I'm not sure," replied the rector, "but we are confident that God will be present, and that should be reason for good attendance!" God is present to all space and is not limited by space. He is not diffused through space with one part here and another part there, but is totally in all places at once. He is present in a believers' service in New York City at the same time as He joins a group of Christians for worship in mid-Africa.

Herein lies one folly of atheism. Ben Hecht, wise-cracking skeptic, recently claimed that with the thrust of man into space, all ideas of God formed before the dawn of the space age have to be discarded. But even with the conquest of space, how can man deny the existence of God? Even if God were visible and He were not in New York, He might be in Chicago. If not in Chicago, He might be in Africa out in some jungle. Or if not even on earth, perhaps on the moon. If someone looked for Him on the moon, perhaps He would have slipped over to Mars or even off our solar system out to the Milky Way. Atheism haughtily presumes its own omnipresence when it arrogantly assumes the non-existence of God. God can be everywhere, whereas finite man is localized. A man wrote on a blackboard, "God is no where." A little girl read it in stumbling fashion, "God is now here."

Not only is God superior by virtue of His omnipresence, but also by His omniscience. The sum total of man's information is but a drop compared to the ocean of God's knowledge. The thinking of man's finest philosophers is but foolishness with God. The epitaph over all philosophy could be written, "Man by wisdom knew not God." Scientists can only guess where their man-made satellites are, but God knows the whereabouts of each one. He knows the number of stars, our names, every sparrow that flies or falls, the number of hairs in our head, all languages, thoughts, future events, things possible as well as actual.

The new resident in the housing development didn't lose any time letting people know he was an atheist. Meeting a new neighbor for the first time he would introduce himself, mention he was a research chemist, then say, "There's no need to believe in the supernatural. For example, we can make rain now. We just send a fellow up in a plane. He drops some chemicals on a cloud, and presto – it rains."

To his utter amazement one day, a neighbor's eight-year-old girl piped up, 'Who made the cloud?'

God's wisdom makes man's knowledge appear foolish. "Well might the omnipotent God laugh (I do not say this irreverently) as He hears the ravings of these ungodly professors in our universities, trying to explain the mystery of the universe, as they measure everything by their own little foot-rules, delving into things beyond human comprehension, deliberately turning away from the revelation that would make everything plain." [2]

Omnipresence, omniscience and also omnipotence make for divine supremacy which permits God to deride those who shake their puny fist in His direction. His power is unfathomable. Man's works can't begin to hold a candle to God's creation. God's grand power can be directed toward His enemies. There is ridiculous absurdity in any created being, devil though he be, hoping to defeat our Omnipotent God to whom we sing "How Great Thou Art!" when one little word can fell the strongest adversary.

When men tried to build a tower to reach heaven, God acted (Genesis 11). Is there not something mildly humorous in His confounding their language? Do we not smile at people trying to make themselves understood to those who speak a different language? Imagine the gesturing and gesticulating as those who previously understood each other now try in vain to comprehend one another. As unusual linguistic noises proceeded from their mouths, picture the dumbfounded expressions showing inability to comprehend. He that sat in the heavens must have laughed.

When the wicked men of Sodom tried to capture the two angels sent by God, God struck them with blindness (Genesis 19). See these who so recently attempted evil now grabbing at Lot's door. He that sat in the heavens must have laughed.

When the Egyptians pursued the Israelites, God confused the enemies of His people by moving the cloud to Israel's rear. This cloud which gave light to Israel plunged the Egyptians into a foggy darkness. If you could have looked down in bird's eye-view you would have seen blinded, blundering Egypt groping its way around in a circle all night, like a dog chasing its tail, unable to come near Israel (Exodus 14). He who watched from heaven must have held the Egyptians in derision as He did a little later when His power parted the Red Sea so that the harassed Israelites passed safely through. But when Pharaoh and his chariots tried to cross, they were overwhelmed by the swirling waters.

When the Philistines captured the ark of God they placed it in a heathen temple beside the image of Dagon, their god. The next morning Dagon was found fallen on its face to the earth before the ark of the Lord (I Samuel 5). Restored to its place, next morning it was discovered not only again prostrate on its face, but its head and hands off, not merely broken by the fall, but deliberately cut off and placed by the threshold, only the stump remaining. One can almost hear the laugh of God.

In exterminating Baal worship in Israel, Jehu broke down the image of Baal and made its temple a depository for all the filth of the town, a cesspool dump (II Kings 10:27). Again the contempt of God is shown for the impotence of false gods. How can idols which have eyes but see not, ears which hear not, feet which walk not, throats that speak not, begin to compare with the true and living God? (Psalm 115:2-15)

The sudden destruction of Sennacherib's army after his boast that no gods had delivered any nation from him (II Kings 18, 19) showed the supremacy of God who had said, "He shall not come into the city, nor shoot an arrow there." God laughs at the impotence of darts and spears to harm Him (Job 41:29).

The superiority of God's power in Christ flashes forth several times in the gospels. In His early ministry His townsfolk tried to push Him over a precipice at Nazareth to cast Him down headlong but He passed through their midst and went His way (Luke 4:29,30). Here is the absurdity of man trying to destroy Christ when it wasn't yet His time. Another similar supernatural escape which likewise could have brought a divine smile at men's weakness is recorded in John 8:59. Every miracle is an illustration of His laughable authority over disease, demons and death. There is something humorous about Jesus sleeping in a storm that brought terror to seasoned sailors (Mark 4:38,39). Perhaps the gospel song "Master, the Tempest Is Raging" with its triumphant refrain, "The winds and the waves shall obey my will," expresses the divine superiority over the elements as He laughingly orders them back to their howling caverns. When the soldiers came to arrest the Lord in Gethsemane they fell backward at His statement "I am He." How laughable, that puny Romans should seize Jesus if He had not permitted them to.

Again in the early church God's smile at the impotence of men is revealed in many ways: the sudden capitulation of persecutor Saul even while breathing out threatenings and slaughter and

bearing official letters to imprison saints in Damascus (Acts 9); the release of Peter from prison as chains fall off and an iron gate opens, with the result that instead of Peter his jailers are put to death (Acts 12); the sudden death of Herod who had just accepted the mob's adulation of his oratory, "It is the voice of a god, and not a man" (Acts 12); the earthquake which shook the jailer, symbol of Roman authority, so that he cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16)

How foolish to think that God can be toppled from His throne. The day after the major earthquake and fire of San Francisco at the turn of the century a newsboy was directing a dazed man through the debris. As they walked the lad philosophized, "It took men a long time to put this stuff up, but God tumbled it over in a minute. Say, mister, 'taint no use for a feller to think he can lick God." When any nation says that satellites disprove God's existence, God must laugh, for He could knock those tiny man-made specks of dust from the sky with the flick of a wish.

## LAUGH OF FINALITY

A newspaper editor received a letter from a reader stating that he had sowed his field on Sunday, reaped it on a Sunday, and that in October it had yielded more than his neighbor's who wouldn't work on Sunday but rather went to church. The editor's comment was, "God does not close His books by the end of October."

Though men may mock God now, the day will come when God will have the last laugh. Because He knows the end from the beginning and because He is all-supreme, He hides His time in patience and longsuffering. When the final curtain rings down, He will laugh in vengeance.

Though the mills of God grind slowly,  
 Yet they grind exceeding small;  
 Though with patience He stands waiting,  
 With exactness grinds He all.  
 – Longfellow

Someday the tables will be turned on those who ridicule God now. How often the Bible illustrates this truth. When Sarah heard she was to become a mother at ninety years of age, she laughed with unbelief, whereupon the Lord informed her that her son would be called Isaac, which means Laughter (Genesis 17:17-19). God had the last laugh, causing Sarah to genuinely rejoice, "God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6).

Pharaoh sneeringly asked Moses, "Who is the Lord?" when Moses demanded Pharaoh to let the Lord's people go. His sneers gave way to the finality of divine derision when God led Israel out of Egyptian bondage (Exodus 5:14).

Job's miserable comforters mocked his adversity by insinuating that his sufferings resulted from secret evil. God reversed the tables, vindicating Job and making his three comforters bring a sacrifice to Job and ask him to pray for them (Job 42:7, 8). They had to eat their words of mockery.

Speaking of the wicked plotting to upset God's throne, the psalmist exclaims, "The Lord shall laugh at him: for He seeth that his day is coming" (Psalm 37:13). One commentator calls this another instance of divine sarcasm as God laughs at His enemy's folly and patiently waits the day of retribution when righteousness shall triumph. [3] In his poem, "Malcolm and Marie", Dr. Oswald J. Smith makes the imprisoned Russian youth, separated from his fiancée through Soviet persecution, exclaim,

Methinks I hear God laugh, so let them rage.  
 He'll hold them in derision till the day  
 He rises in His wrath, and in His hot  
 Displeasure, vexes those who vainly seek  
 To tear Him from His throne for judgment set.  
 What folly if a sparrow hurl itself  
 Against a locomotive in its pride,  
 Expecting thus to check it in its speed!  
 As little hope have they who mock at God. [4]

Long after every atheistic, God-slurring dictator has been forgotten, God will still laugh on.

Some men in their so-called wisdom refuse to follow God's ways. Some day, divine wisdom will laugh at their calamities and mock when fear comes (Proverbs 1:26). The verbs in this verse are the same as translated "laugh" and "have in derision" in Psalm 2:4. Man's best wisdom apart from God will be proven to be far beneath the wisdom of God. When a preacher in Ontario announced by billboard he would speak on "The Foolishness of God", he was hauled before the court because there was a

law against blasphemy. He explained his theme was a quote from the Bible, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men", and means that the simplest wisdom of God far surpasses the most brilliant of man's wisdom (I Corinthians 1:25). Talleyrand, French diplomat, for money, fame and power bought, sold, double-crossed and duped twenty kings and leaders including Napoleon, Alexander of Russia, Francis of Austria and Louis XVIII of France, erected many palaces and led two revolutions. When he died doctors embalmed him after removing his brains, and placed him in a satin-lined coffin. A servant entered to clean up the room and wondered what should be done with the stuff on the table. He remembered a sewer out in the street, so threw the brains therein. Man's brains fade; God's wisdom wins out at last.

In the gospels our Lord had the last smile many a time. After His disciples had fished fruitlessly overnight, Christ told them to let down their nets for a catch. Peter replied with amused condescension, "Master, we've toiled all night and have taken nothing," as if to say, "We know our trade. Are you telling us experienced fishermen how to run our business?" When Peter did let down the net, the number of fish was so great the net broke and partners from another boat were needed to help. Peter then acknowledged Christ's superiority by saying, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:1-10).

When Jesus intimated that death had not dealt its final blow to Jairus' daughter, the crowd laughed Him to scorn. A few minutes later the laugh was on them when the maid arose and walked. In an article fittingly called "The Conclusive Laughter of God", Rev. John W. Duddington says this story "illustrates the laughter of 'him that sitteth in the heavens' in relation to the misplaced laughter of the unbelieving, and is an acted parable of God's redemptive 'turning of the tables' at the conclusion of history. Even the parenthesis in the story when Jesus was interrupted temporarily by the woman with the issue of blood pictures the hidden divine laughter in the overruling of adverse circumstances – delay, and the inadequacies of the human equation – so that they serve the purposes of His Kingdom." [5]

Shrill laughter and jeering jests filled the air at Golgotha. "He saved others; himself he cannot save!" "If Thou be the Christ, come down from the cross!" Satan and his hosts were laughing. But Satan really became a laughing-stock at Calvary, for by dying Christ destroyed him that had the power of death, paid the penalty for our sins and made it possible for man to live victoriously over evil. God had the last laugh when at Easter Christ emerged from the tomb. How absurd was the act of the Sanhedrin in sealing the tomb to make it as sure as possible. The resurrection laughs at the mockery of Good Friday. "The stone which the builders refused is become the head of the corner" (Psalm 118:22). The world may ridicule the cross but heaven laughs last.

The story of the entire Bible is the victory of God over His enemies as He rescues and redeems man. Impatient men may forget that the final chapter of history has yet to be written.

Ingersoll, famous skeptic of the last century, took out his watch in the midst of a lecture he was giving, and said, "I'll give God five minutes to strike me dead, if there is a God!"

When Dr. Joseph Parker of the City Temple, London, heard of Ingersoll's challenge to God, he commented, "Does the gentleman think he can exhaust the patience of God in five minutes?"

In the diary of Jim Elliot, who was martyred by the Aucas, is this entry, "One flash of His burning eye will melt all our polished marble and burnished gold to nothing. One word from His righteous lips will speak destruction to the vast rebellion we call the human race. One peal of His vengeful laughter will rock the libraries of our wise and bring them crashing to a rubble heap. The wise shall be taken in their own craftiness; mountains shall be brought low. What shall abide that day? Lo, 'He that doeth the will of God abideth forever.'" [6]

## LAUGH OF METHOD

In dispensing His justice, God uses methods which to the contemplative observer possess some humor, though sometimes on the grim side.

### ***1. He makes people reap as they sow***

A student in college tricked up a pail of water over his door so as to fall on a troublesome fellow from down the hall who came to pester him every evening. Called from his room by a side door, the student returned to his room by the front door and forgot the pail of water till it tumbled soakingly over him. The other students laughed. The psalmist spoke of a fellow who dug pits, covering them over to trap animals but, forgetting where he had dug them, fell in one (Psalm 7:15-17; 9:15; Proverbs 26:27).

Someone wrote,

He digged a pit; he digged it deep;  
 He digged it for another.  
 It so fell out, that he fell in;  
 The pit he digged for a brother.

If a man threw a boomerang which returned to hit the thrower on the head, spectators would laugh. The return of mischief upon the mischief-maker's head is amusing, sometimes soberly so. A man serving a long sentence in a penitentiary was visited by an old friend. The convict sat cross-legged with an enormous needle and ball of twine, sewing burlap bags. "Hello," said the friend, "sewing, eh?"

"No," answered the prisoner, a grim smile playing across his lips. "I'm reaping."

The Bible abounds in graphic illustrations of the principle, "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." Lot selfishly chose the well-watered plains and pitched his tent toward Sodom. His selfishness backfired when Sodom seized a throttle-hold on his family, so much so that his sons-in-law perished in its destruction and his wife couldn't resist gazing fondly at it, thus turning to Sodomite ash. Laban who trickily changed Jacob's wages ten times was out-swinded by Jacob and his own daughters, Leah and Rachel. Jacob, who deceived his father with the use of goat's hair, was himself deceived in late life regarding his favorite son, Joseph; and the blood of the same kind of animal, a goat, was spilled on Joseph's coat of many colors, to make it appear that Joseph had met foul play.

Joseph toyed with his brothers by having his divining-cup hidden in Benjamin's sack (Genesis 44). The brothers were tormented with the thought of reporting to their aged father, Jacob, of any mishap to his beloved Benjamin. But they had given Joseph much torment of thought many years before. Now they were getting their medicine back.

Pharaoh, who ordered all male babies drowned, had army drowned in the Red Sea. The land of Israel was to lie desolate during the captivity because the Israelites did not rest on the Sabbath when they dwelt there before their captivity (Leviticus 26:34,35). Man normally reaps far more than he sows. For every one of the forty days the spies searched out the land before bringing back their report which showed no faith, as punishment the Lord made them wander a year, making a total of forty years of wilderness meandering (Numbers 14:33,34).

Adoni-bezek cut off the thumbs and great toes of seventy kings he captured. When captured, his thumbs and great toes were amputated (Judges 1:6,7). King David broke up a man's house by taking his wife and causing the death of the husband. From that hour on David's house was plagued by immoralities and murders.

Wicked Ahab and Jezebel caused Naboth's blood to be shed so they could confiscate his property. In the very place where the dogs licked Naboth's blood was the blood of Ahab later licked, and also his son's blood (I Kings 21:23 and II Kings 9:25,26). Haman, who built the gallows to hang Mordecai, was hanged on his own gallows (Esther 7:10).

Undeniably there was no humor in this event for Haman and those of his family, just tragedy. But to those unemotionally involved, and to those objectively separated from this event by centuries, the element of humor is not lost. Though the event in its totality must be classified as tragic, a minor segment is comic. We have abstracted the grim humor a man hanged on his own gallows that he intended for another – never forgetting the overall tragedy.

Those who concocted the plot to land Daniel into the lions' den were later thrown in and crushed to pieces (Daniel 6:24). God is not mocked by wild sowing (Galatians 6:7,8). Rather God mocks last, because those who sow to the wind reap the whirlwind (Hosea 8:7).

## **2. He capitalizes on the weapons used against Him and redirects them for His own purposes**

In Biblical language, He makes the wrath of men to praise Him (Psalm 76:10). The Jews in the Persian empire were scheduled for annihilation on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, because that day had been selected by the throwing of the lot (*pur*). Through divine intervention the Jews were spared and that day of doom became a time of gladness and gift-giving known as the Feast of Purim (lots), observed to this day by the Jews around the world. God made the devices of the wicked turn to His praise (Esther 8:16,17).

Amusingly enough, God made Caiaphas unintentionally preach the Gospel when he said it was expedient for one man to die for the people (John 18:14). Pilate wanted to spite the Jews for putting him in an awkward spot at the trial of Jesus. God used that spite so that Pilate gave a true designation of Christ, "Shall I crucify your King?" (John 19:15) and "The King of the Jews" (John 19:19-23).

Through the beating and imprisonment of Paul and Silas, a jailer and his household were converted (Acts 16:26-32). When Paul was a prisoner in Rome, some jealous Christians preached out of envy and strife, but God even used these wrong motives for the preaching of His truth. Also while he was a prisoner, soldiers chained to him could not escape hearing the Gospel. We smile when we think of chaining someone to us so we can give him the Gospel. Through hearing Paul preach, dictate letters to churches, or counsel inquirers, many soldiers in the Emperor's inner sanctum became Christians, so that Paul could write that those "of Caesar's household" were sending their greetings (Philippians 4:22).

Would we not smile if somehow we could intercept a missile fired against us and redirect it to strike a blow against our enemy? May it not be with a laugh that God makes all things work together for good?

### **3. He uses unexpected and unlikely means to accomplish His work**

Years ago in a certain southern community, an atheist used to curse God just to shock the saints. One day storm clouds loomed in the sky. Walking outdoors he shouted, "God, kill this old atheist!" The people shuddered. While he was raving on, lightning struck and killed his little girl. Picking up her dead body, he became a raving maniac. He shook his fist toward heaven and cursed God, yelling, "God, kill me! Show them how You hate atheists!" He reached down for his axe, intending to cut some wood to heat water to dress the body of his dead daughter. When he picked up the axe there was an insect under the handle. It bit him and he died of blood poisoning. God didn't need a flash of lightning to kill him. All the Almighty needed was to hide a little insect under an axe handle.

Often God uses unlikely, almost laughable means to do His will. Great King Pharaoh was crossed by lowly midwives who refused to drown male babies (Exodus 1:15-20). It is humorous that little hornets could drive out the great Hittites and Canaanites (Exodus 23:28). God used a dumb ass to get a message across to Balaam (Numbers 22:28). Gideon's little band of three hundred defeated the Midianites and Amalekites who were like "grasshoppers for multitude, and whose camels were numberless like the sand of the sea for multitude" (Judges 7:7,12). All they used were trumpets, pitchers and lamps. Children delight to hear how by a mere pebble David defeated the giant Goliath (I Samuel 17:48-52). Washing seven times in muddy Jordan seemed a ridiculous way to get rid of leprosy, but that was the way Naaman was healed (II Kings 5:10). Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings God ordained praise. Imagine the incongruity of babes and sucklings who can barely lisp praising God while older people who can phrase words clearly fail to worship. God prepared a big fish to haul back wayward Jonah. Christ used a mere five loaves and two fishes to feed five thousand men plus women and children.

Paul sets forth the seeming absurdity of God's method in his first Corinthian epistle. God has chosen the foolish, weak, base and despised things of the world to confound the wise and mighty (I Corinthians 1:27,28). A man feeling inadequacy for the Lord's service answered a call to work with, "If God can use Balaam's ass, He can use me." Our best service is laughably deficient, like a little child's help:

"The baby helped shell beans today; Saved the waste – threw the good away. I've thought how patient God must be, When I help Him like she helps me."

To those who perish, the message of the cross is absurd. Wise men ask, "How by shedding blood on a despised and shameful Roman gibbet could our sins be forgiven?" Yet by dying Christ destroyed him that had the power of death. By the foolishness of the cross God forgives men and grants a power within to live godly lives. G. Campbell Morgan said, "Look at men, look at the wisdom of words, and what do we see? A mental strength inquiring, suggesting, debating, arguing, surmising, what? Nothing . . . God is laughing at that foolishness, the silliness of men; and He is giving men this great Cross as a revelation and a message and a power. [7]"

So there is something humorous in the methods God uses to work His will. He makes men reap what they sow, adapts the evil of men to honor His own cause, and utilizes the most unlikely of instruments to further His plan. "He taketh the wise in their own craftiness" (I Corinthians 3:19).

## **LAUGH OF GRACE**

On the other hand, not only does God humble the haughty but He lifts the lowly. Those who mock Him in pride are downgraded. Those who acknowledge their unworthiness are upgraded, even redeemed. One element of humor is sudden, unexpected reversal. The fulfillment of Christ's promise, "Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (Matthew 23:12) has its funny side.

That God could ever be interested in tiny man is absurdly astounding. Says the psalmist, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what

is man, that thou art mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:3,4). A friend of the late Teddy Roosevelt told how he and the president used to play a little game the nights they were together. Just before retiring they would go outside and search the heavens till one of them found a faint speck of light-mist beyond the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus. Then whoever found it would recite, "That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun." Then Roosevelt or his friend would grin and say, "Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed!"

The verse "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" goes on to the stupendous truth "that thou visitest him" (Psalm 8:4b). Two incongruous truths – the insignificance of man and the importance of man – were wedded by the Incarnation. The same Judean hills where David keeping his flocks meditated on the smallness of man compared to the vastness of the universe were lit up a thousand years later as other shepherds watched their flock by night when suddenly the glory of the Lord shone round about bringing the message, "Unto you this day in the city of David is born a Saviour, Christ the Lord." Man is small; yet man is great because God thought so much of man that He linked Himself to human nature. The speck of man can become a son of God.

Grace has been called undeserved favor. It is incongruous indeed that a sinful hell-bent creature should suddenly find himself forgiven of his sins and heaven-bound. Incongruous grace! Jacob, schemer and supplanter, fleeing the scene of his deed lest his disfranchised brother kill him, suddenly is visited by God in a dream with angels ascending and descending from heaven. Deserving punishment, he receives a message of blessing. The prodigal son, waster of his father's substance, has a party thrown in his honor by his overjoyed father who kills the fatted calf, dresses his son in the best robe and bejewels his finger. "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."

"Here is unimaginable absurdity; mighty angels are hilarious because old John Smith is crying. All of grace is like that – incongruous, unthinkable, amazing . . . It is amusing to think of a camel's going through the eye of a needle; but it is divine comedy indeed, amazing, laughable, wonderful – to be a redeemed sinner entering heaven's feast!" [8]

When the forces of evil are frustrated by God's wrath, the divine laugh is not heaven's greatest victory over wrong. Rather, when an evil person is convicted of his errors and pleads mercy, then unbounding joy rings out in heaven over one sinner who repents. One writer puts it, "The Church is the community of men and women who are learning with increasing gaiety that the joke is on them, that God has redeemed them in spite of themselves." [9]

Perhaps the gospel song "Amazing Grace" could be correctly entitled "Laughable Grace".

Speaking of God's plan of redemption in the light of evil in the world, one author suggests,

It is almost as though love watches with humor, knowing that sooner or later evil will have had its day. Love looks to the end. It sees everything from the viewpoint of the end . . . Through love the reality of life becomes a game of sorts . . . The Devil is much more grim than is God. He is horribly serious when he pits himself against God and God's world. But God cannot take it with absolute earnestness. He allows it. He does not quickly throw Himself into a total rush at Satan's center, not even in His wrath. He rides the course along another way than Satan had chosen for the final head-on.

. . . The situation has overtones of humor. The humor of it, indeed, is the heart of the Gospel as the message of love . . . Satan becomes a joke in the end. Love's goodness turns Satan into a ridiculous figure by its humorous response to the horrible earnestness of evil. When the Gospel calls us to conversion, it calls us, then, to put away our resentment at love's way of working. It calls us to see the humor of the inside story of the world's whole affair with evil; it teaches us to laugh again. [10]

## GLEE WITH GOD

God laughs. Those who are on His side can laugh with God. Praise and godly laughter are first cousins. Children laugh with glee at the immunity from flame enjoyed by the three children of Israel when thrown into the fiery furnace while it devoured those who tossed them in. Children also laugh when they learn how the lions' mouths were shut when Daniel was thrown in their den. Even the king was glad. He must have laughed at the superiority of Daniel's God. Jerusalem laughed at Sennacherib's threats to destroy the city (II Kings 19:21). Many of the songs in the Bible are people laughing with God at those who oppose Him: for example, the song of Moses and the Israelites exulting in God's victory over Pharaoh (Exodus 15); the song of victory of Deborah and Barak over Sisera and the Canaanites (Judges 5); David's song of deliverance from his enemies (II Samuel 22); rejoicing on the day of dedication of the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 12: 43). Many Psalms can be analyzed as an expression of laughter and praise to God for His deliverance, defense and refuge from enemies. Are not the imprecatory Psalms the sigh of an oppressed people for God to rise up in wrathful, but laughable, superiority over His opponents? Are they not an invocation of the justice and

power of God to laugh at His enemies? When the Babylonian captivity ended, the mouths of the returning exiles were filled with laughter, and their tongues with singing (Psalm 126:2).

Likewise how frequent must have been the shouts of glee in New Testament days, when the Lord demonstrated His power over demons, disease and death. When the blind saw, the lame walked, the deaf heard and the dumb spake, those who were restored to health as well as the multitude that saw, marvelled and glorified God. The many supernatural releases from prison of God's servants were laughable miracles showing the superiority of God over the authority of man.

The Gospel laughs at the last enemy, death. Christ won the victory over death, holds its key, and makes it possible for us to exultingly ask, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (I Corinthians 15: 55) Then the cry of triumph follows, full of glee at the defeat of death, "But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 15:57).

Death cannot keep his prey  
Jesus my Saviour!  
He tore the bars away  
Jesus my Lord!

The chorus of this Easter song by Robert Lowry seems to become a laugh in crescendo:

Up from the grave He arose,  
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes;  
He arose a Victor from the dark domain,  
And He lives forever with His saints to reign.  
He arose! He arose!  
Hallelujah! Christ arose!

Eugene O'Neill wrote a play, *Lazarus Laughed*, in which he pictures Lazarus, after his resurrection from the dead, going about laughing. The dramatist makes Lazarus say, "There is only life! I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart . . . and I laughed in the laughter of God!" The growing crowds capture the mood of Lazarus, chanting as they march, "Laugh! Laugh! Laugh with Lazarus! Fear is no more! There is no death!" [11] At the climax of the play Lazarus faces Caesar, laughs at the Emperor's threats and is put to death still laughing. Poor Caesar isn't quite so sure he has proven there is death.

Because God's forces of righteousness will ultimately and inevitably triumph over the terrors of evil, the Christian can laugh at death, life, principalities, powers, things present, things to come, height, depth and any other creature, knowing none of these can separate from the love of God and its certain victory. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). When situations seem insurmountable, faith laughs at impossibilities and cries "It shall be done," and "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13) and "Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ" (II Corinthians 2:14). If we could see beyond today, our tears would turn to laughs. John Newton wrote:

On the Rock of Ages founded,  
What can shake my sure repose?  
With salvation's walls surrounded,  
Thou mayst *smile* at all thy foes.

The heroes of faith who were tortured, cruelly mocked and scourged, stoned, imprisoned, sawn asunder, slain with the sword, and who wandered in deserts, mountains, dens and caves (Hebrews 11:35-37) knew that this life was not the final act. By faith they were confident that when the final curtain rang down God would provide better things for them. Writing of the apostles, Reginald Heber penned words that could expand to include all martyrs:

A glorious band, the chosen few  
On whom the Spirit came,  
Twelve valiant saints, their hope they knew,  
And *mocked* the cross and flame:  
They met the tyrant's brandished steel,  
The lion's gory mane;  
They bowed their necks the death to feel:  
Who follows in their train?

How absurd were Mary Magdalene's tears before the empty tomb as she mistook the risen Christ for the gardener! How ridiculous for the Christian to be anything but radiantly joyful in the knowledge of God's final redemption! One morning during a period when Luther had been quite despondent his wife came downstairs dressed in mourning attire. Surprised, Luther asked her who was dead. She replied, "Don't you know? God in heaven is dead." Luther rebuked her, "How can you talk such nonsense, Katie? How can God die?"

"Is that really true?" she prodded.

Not understanding what she was getting at, Luther proceeded to teach her theology. "As surely as there is a God in heaven, so sure is it that He can never die."

"And yet," she commented, "you act as though God were dead, for you're so hopeless and discouraged." Then Luther saw how wise his wife was and how foolish he was. His sadness changed to gladness with renewed faith in the living, supreme God.

Laughter comes with the sudden incoming of gladness over obstacles overcome. Particularly, relief at the assurance of sins remitted should prompt the laughter of joy.

The day will come when all the redeemed will sing the song of redemption, victory through the Lamb. May not he who laughs last – with God – laugh best?

## NOTES ON CHAPTER 8

- 1 Harold J. Ockenga, *Protestant Preaching in Lent* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 50.
- 2 H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on First Corinthians* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1958), p. 66.
- 3 Pierson, *op. cit.*, p. 439.
- 4 Oswald J. Smith, "Malcolm and Marie," in *Poems of a Lifetime* (Wheaton, Illinois: VanKampen Press, 1954), pp. 183, 184.
- 5 Duddington, *loc. cit.*
- 6 Elliot, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
- 7 G. Campbell Morgan, *The Corinthian Letters of Paul* (New York: Revell, 1946), p. 34.
- 8 Eutychus, *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1959.
- 9 Duddington, *loc. cit.*
- 10 A. A. Van Ruler, *The Greatest of These Is Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), pp. 23, 26.
- 11 Eugene O'Neill, *Lazarus Laughed* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1941).

## APPENDIX

### Put a Little Laughter in Your Life

#### BIBLE

An American engineer working on a Pacific island met a native near a boiling pot, and to the American's surprise the native was reading a Bible.

"Back in America, we gave that Book up long ago. Few people really believe it now."

Replied the native, "It's a good thing the Bible reached here before you did, for if it hadn't, you would be boiling in that big pot right now!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A clergyman was delighted at the sudden spurt of interest shown in the Bible by a young housewife who came to church spasmodically. She had just phoned to ask for another word for the Ten Commandments. "Decalogue," said the pastor.

"It's so nice of you to tell me," she replied airily. "Now if that quiz program calls me today, I'm good for at least \$10,000."

\* \* \* \* \*

A ladies' Bible class was having a week-day meeting in the home of one of the members. The gathering came on the day when the cleaning woman came. But that day she was ill and sent a friend in her place. As the devotions were about to begin, the leader said to the hostess, "I came away without my Bible today. Could I borrow yours?"

The hostess hurried to get her Bible, but couldn't find it. She knew where it was, and had used it the day before. But it wasn't anywhere to be found. She searched everywhere. The noise of opening and shutting drawers reached the women. "What will they think of me?" wondered the embarrassed hostess. In panic she ran down to the kitchen where the cleaning woman was at work. "Did you see anything of my Bible?" she asked breathlessly.

"Oh, praise the Lord," exclaimed the cleaning lady.

"What do you mean?"

"Praise the Lord," she continued. "The first thing I do when I start working for someone is to hide their Bible."

"But why?"

"Just to see how long it takes the people there to miss it. Yours is in the linen closet."

#### CHILDREN – IN CHURCH

A little girl went to church for the first time. After the service the minister asked how she had liked it. "Well," she thought for a moment, "I thought the music was very fine, but your commercial was too long!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The ushers were passing the offering plate. It was a little fellow's first time in church. As they neared him, he leaned over to his father and whispered, "Don't pay for me, daddy. I'm under five." (Used by permission of *Pageant*, April, 1958.)

\* \* \* \* \*

A preacher was invited to deliver a sermon at a country church on a week night. He took his little boy with him. As they entered the church they noticed a box marked, "For the preacher". The minister dropped a dollar in the box. When the sermon was over, the deacons opened the box to count the money and out rolled the dollar bill. They handed it to the preacher, whereupon his little boy exclaimed, "Daddy, if you had put more into it, you would have gotten more out of it!"

\* \* \* \* \*

When the plate went by a little girl her first time in church, she dropped her penny in, then asked her mother, "What will come out of the plate, bubble gum or licorice stick?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Just before church a father gave his little girl two coins, a nickel and a quarter. "Now, Marie put one coin in the offering, whichever you choose." Father was trying to develop Marie's unselfishness.

After church father asked which coin Marie had given. She explained, "Just before the plate came round the minister said, 'The Lord loveth a cheerful giver,' and I knew I could give the nickel a lot more cheerfully than the quarter, so I gave it."

\* \* \* \* \*

A little girl was taken to church for her first time. When everyone knelt, she asked, "What are they going to do?"

The mother whispered, "Sssh, they are going to say their prayers."

Amazed, the child looked up, 'What, with all their clothes on?"

### CHOIR

The boys' choir was making its Sunday morning processional. As usual, the first boy in the procession carried a banner. When the congregation looked in his direction their eyes nearly popped out. Instead of the usual symbols were some words. They read, "We want more pay!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The benediction had just been pronounced ending the Sunday morning service in a Canadian church. The choir started its recessional, singing – as they marched in perfect step down the center aisle to the back of the church. The last lady was wearing shoes with very slender heels. Without a thought for her fancy heels, she marched toward the grating that covered the hot air register in the middle of the aisle. Suddenly the heel of one shoe sank into the hole in the register grate. In a flash she realized her predicament. Not wishing to hold up the whole recessional while she stepped back to yank out her heel, she did the next best thing. Without missing a step she slipped her foot out of her shoe and continued marching down the aisle. There wasn't a hitch. The recessional moved with clock-like precision.

The first man after her spotted the situation and without losing a step, reached down and pulled up her shoe. But the entire grate came with it. Surprised, but still singing, the man kept on going down the aisle, holding in his hand the grate with the shoe attached. Everything still moved like clock work. Still in tune and still in step the next man stepped into the open register. (Used by permission of *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, and *The Reader's Digest*.)

\* \* \* \* \*

A college girl who sang solos in the choir of one of the local churches received an anonymous letter which praised her singing and announced that her unknown admirer would sit in the balcony the next Sunday morning, wearing a white chrysanthemum in his lapel. That night on a date with a member of the football team she couldn't resist telling him, then forgot the matter.

Sunday morning, just before time for her solo she remembered the note. Looking towards the balcony, she couldn't see the people without standing up. As she waited, her imagination ran away with her. Would he be tall, dark and handsome, mysterious? Then the notes of the organ began playing the prelude to her song. Excitedly, she almost jumped up, then almost collapsed with embarrassment. Grinning at her from the balcony was the entire football squad, each with a white chrysanthemum in his buttonhole. (Used by permission of *The Reader's Digest*, "Life's Like That", by G. Hillary.)

\* \* \* \* \*

An aspiring choir soloist was vocalizing in her living room. The windows were open and a handyman was working on the lawn near-by. Seeing him, she asked, "How do you like my execution?"

He looked up. "I'm in favor of it."

### COLLECTIONS

A breathless silence fell over the congregation. The church was jammed to the doors. The back balcony was crowded. A special offering had been taken and the total given was to be announced at the end of the service. The goal was \$20,000. The ushers had finished counting it and brought a note with the total written on it to the pastor. Now was the climactic moment. "The total amount received was," the pastor began, then his forehead clouded over as he hesitantly read, "\$20,000 and three cents." Pausing a moment, he said, "That's a strange total. \$20,000 and three cents. Three cents! There must be a Scotsman here."

From the balcony came a voice, "Hoots, mon, there are three of us here."

\* \* \* \* \*

To get money for a much needed new building a minister asked all who would give \$50.00 to stand. Then turning to his youth orchestra, he told them to play "The Star Spangled Banner!"

Next week he had another scheme. On Saturday, he had the sexton wire the church so that every seat had a little button on it which was connected with a central switch on the pulpit. One press on the pulpit switch would send a current of electrical juice to every seat. On Sunday at the end of the service he asked all who would give \$50.00 to stand. No one got up. Then he pushed the switch. Everyone jumped up. Monday when he was cleaning the church, the sexton found two electrocuted Scotsmen lying in the seats.

\* \* \* \* \*

A Sunday school teacher was trying to explain the difference between a collection and an offering. He told about a boy whose mother served a chicken dinner. The boy sneaked some good meat on a plate for his dog – first a leg, then a wing, then some white meat. His mother spotted it. “Oh, no you don’t!” She made the boy put back the meat and after the meal gave him a dish of bones for Towser. As the boy put them down in front of the dog, he said, “I did have an offering for you. Now it’s only a collection!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“When I look at my congregation,” said one preacher, “I ask myself, ‘Where are the poor?’ And then when I look at the offering plate, I say to myself, ‘Where are the rich?’”

\* \* \* \* \*

Someone asked, “What is the most sensitive nerve in the human body?”

The preacher answered, “The one that leads to the pocketbook.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A prosperous but stingy businessman was asked for a contribution to a charitable organization. “Yes,” he said piously, “I’ll give you my mite.”

“Do you mean the widow’s mite?” asked the collector.

“Of course.”

“Well, I shall be satisfied with half that much,” said the solicitor. “How much are you worth approximately?”

“Oh, about \$70,000,” said the well-to-do businessman.

“Then give me your check for \$35,000. That will be half as much as the widow gave, for she gave all that she had!”

\* \* \* \* \*

An older Brazilian Christian said to a new Christian, “Romel, if you had 100 sheep, would you give 50 of them for the Lord’s work?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Would you do the same if you had 100 cows?”

“Yes, I would.”

“How about if you had 100 horses? Would you do the same?”

“Sure I would.”

“If you had two pigs, would you give one of them to the Lord?”

“No, I wouldn’t; and you have no right to ask me, for you know I have two pigs!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“You’re an insignificant little runt,” said the half-dollar to the dime.

“I may be,” said the dime, “but I go to church oftener than you!”

## COURTSHIP

A charming belle was being courted by a young banker. When queried by a friend, she said flatly, “It doesn’t mean a thing. If that stuffed shirt proposes I’ll give him a deaf ear.”

Next week she was wearing the young banker’s large diamond. Said the friend, “I thought you said you’d be deaf to any proposal from him.”

“I did,” replied the belle, looking at the lovely diamond, “but I didn’t say I’d be stone deaf.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A young fellow slipped quietly into a jeweler’s store. He handed the jeweler a ring. “I would like some names engraved on it.”

“What names do you want?”

“From James to Barbara,” the young man whispered.

"Please take some advice from me," said the jeweler as he looked up from the ring. "Have it just engraved, 'From James'."

\* \* \* \* \*

A girl and boy fell madly in love at first sight. He saw her every day. When a new job sent the boy to a distant city, so deeply in love was he that he telegraphed a message of devotion every morning. So every morning for three years the same Western Union messenger knocked on the girl's door. At the end of three years they were married – the girl and the Western Union boy.

\* \* \* \* \*

The police chief in a Missouri city received a letter from a woman in another state who asked him to find her a perfect man. She wanted to marry him. Her specifications: a man about sixty with no children, preferably a railroad executive, banker or lawyer. The chief of police sent the letter to the Bureau of Missing Persons.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two big tears were floating down the river of time. They began to engage in conversation. Said the first tear, "I am the tear of the girl who lost her boyfriend to another girl."

"Don't feel so badly," consoled the other tear. "I'm the tear of the girl who got him."

### DEACONS

A milkman who delivered his route by horse and wagon used to give the same testimony at every prayer meeting. It was the same old sentence, "I'm not making much progress, but praise the Lord, I'm established." One April morning when he was on his route, his wagon sank into deep mud and his horse could not budge it. Along came a deacon who could never quite accept the milkman's testimony. Looking the situation over he said with a smile, "Well, Brother, I see you're not making much progress, but you're sure established!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A young man was driving a deacon to a service in the next town. The youthful driver had his streamlined roadster hitting seventy miles an hour. The deacon leaned over, "Aren't we going a little too fast?"

"Oh don't you believe in a guardian angel, deacon? He'll take care of us."

"Yes," the deacon replied. "He would if he were here, but I'm afraid we left him miles back!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Prayer meeting was almost over. The pastor thought he would ask a member of the official board to close in prayer. "Deacon Jones, will you please lead?"

Silence. Deacon Jones had fallen asleep. His wife nudged him just as the pastor repeated his request. "Deacon Jones, will you please lead?"

"Lead," stammered the confused deacon, "I just dealt."

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is my father's den," said a boy as he showed his pal, a deacon's son, around his house. "Does your dad have a den?"

"No," said the other, "he growls all over the house."

### DENOMINATIONS

The registrar in an undenominational seminary noted that in the incoming freshman class a good percentage had signed up with some church preference. Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist were all represented in normal ratio. But he came across one card signed by a young man who had majored in architecture in his under-graduate work. He put down "Gothic".

\* \* \* \* \*

A lady whose husband's climb up the ladder to success led her to a more showy way of life changed to a better car, better home, better furs, and a better church. After another major advance which landed her in the Cadillac stage, she paid a visit to her latest minister. "I've had the feeling for some time that I should join with my friends at another church," she said, swinging her furs around her back and flashing her two carat diamonds. "What would be your opinion, sir?"

"My dear lady," the clergyman replied, "it matters little what kind of label you put on an empty bottle!"

## DISCIPLINE OF CHILDREN

A lively little fellow climbed on a hobby horse in the toy section of a big department store. When his mother told him to get off, he stubbornly refused. Her arms were full of packages, so she tried to bribe him with promises of candy and gum, but no success. The boy just shook his head no and rocked back and forth. Then the store Santa Claus noticed the embarrassed mother's plight. He bent over and whispered something in the boy's ear. Like a shot he was off the horse and out of the store, his mother right behind. A surprised salesman asked, "What under the sun did you promise the boy?"

"Promise him?" asked the disgusted Santa. "I promised him nothing. I told him to get off or I'd kick him out of his trousers!"

\* \* \* \* \*

At breakfast one morning eight-year-old cutie-pie pushed her cornflakes away from her, loudly protesting that she would not eat the stuff. "More than that," she screamed, "I won't eat any breakfast unless there's something gooder."

Indulgent mother asked, "Well, what would you like for breakfast?"

"I want a worm," cutie-pie yelled. "A big, juicy one!"

Again progressive mother, who did not believe children should be frustrated lest they grow up to become left-handed, a missionary or a musician, sent father to the garden. A few minutes later he appeared with a fat worm. Cutie-pie went into a tantrum. "I want it cooked." So rolled in butter, it was cooked to a golden brown and brought back to the table. The little lady sobbed and sighed, "I want daddy to eat half of it." After a half minute of hesitation punctuated by cutie-pie's whining, the father closed his eyes, shuddered and gulped. Half the worm was gone. Then came a tempest as cutie-pie howled.

"What do you want now?" asked mother. "Didn't daddy eat half the worm?"

"Yes, but he ate the half I wanted!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A new family moved into an ultra-modern home in a new development. An endless stream of modern appliances was delivered. One neighbor asked, "Is everything in that home run by the switch?"

Another neighbor, who had seen some of their children tearing up the backyard, retorted, "Everything but the children!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mother, am I a canoe?" asked Joan of her mother.

"Most certainly not," mother emphatically replied. "Whatever makes you ask that?"

"You're always saying you like to see people paddle their own canoe. And since you paddle me so much, I thought I was a canoe!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The department store was crowded with shoppers. A young mother had the added difficulty of a small daughter pulling and tugging at her side, and whimpering incessantly. Suddenly the harassed mother pleaded softly, "Quiet, Susanna, just calm yourself and take it easy." An admiring clerk commented on the mother's psychology, then turned to the child, "So your name is Susanna."

"Oh, no," interrupted the mother, "her name's Joan. I'm Susanna."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you believe in spanking your children?" one parent asked another.

"No," came the reply, "but I do believe in giving them a pat on the back, often enough, hard enough and low enough."

\* \* \* \* \*

Two fathers were discussing the problems of raising families.

One asked, "Do you ever strike your children?"

"Only in self-defense," came the answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

A mother was trying to explain the meaning of grandfather and grandmother.

"Now if grandfather is my father can you tell me who grandmother is?"

"Sure," replied the little girl. "Grandmother is the white-haired lady that keeps you from spanking me."

## EDUCATION

Billy Graham tells the story of a coach who was most eager for a certain ball player to be accepted by the college, so arranged for an interview between the athlete and the dean. "If you are able to answer one simple question you can enter college," said the dean. Then he asked, "How many are six and six?"

The athlete thought for a minute, then answered, "Thirteen."

There was silence. Then the coach broke in, "Aw, Dean, let him in. He only missed it by two!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A missionary came across a tribe of cannibals deep in the jungles. They had just finished a favorite repast. Meeting the chief, he started a conversation. To his amazement, the chief finally confided that he had attended college in the United States. "Do you mean to tell me that you went to college in America and that you still eat human beings?"

"Yes," responded the chief, "but I use a knife and fork now."

\* \* \* \* \*

A proud father was greeted on the street by a neighbor.

"Congratulations on your son's graduation from college!"

Then the neighbor asked, "Isn't it expensive to send a son to college these days?"

"Sure is," said the father. "It cost me thousands of dollars and all I got was a quarterback."

## FORMALITY

When young and just converted, D. L. Moody used to fill up a pew in a rather aristocratic Boston church with street urchins. Many of the upper-crust church members resented this intrusion. When Moody tried to join the church, the board discouraged him. "Think it over for a month," they advised. "And pray about it, too."

They thought that would be the last they would see Moody. But they failed to take into account his indomitable drive. The next month he appeared before the board again. Rather taken back, they asked, "Did you do what we suggested? Did you pray about it?"

"I did," Moody quietly replied.

"And did the Lord give you any encouragement?"

"Yes," said Moody, "He told me not to feel bad because He has been trying to get in this same church for the last twenty-five years, too."

\* \* \* \* \*

A preacher gave out some wonderful truth. Someone shouted "Amen!" An elder went over and tapping him on the shoulder, asked, "What's the matter?"

"I'm getting religion," the man replied.

Said the elder, "This isn't the place to get it!"

\* \* \* \* \*

An elderly lady, poor in this world's goods, was rich in enthusiasm for the Christian faith. Though she belonged to a staid, dignified church, she often burst out with a loud "Hallelujah", much to the dismay of the church officials.

So the elders took counsel and approached her with this proposition. "If you will not disturb the peace of our church service by shouting 'Hallelujah', we'll give you two large, warm blankets."

Desperately needing the extra covers, she agreed. But next Sunday morning she heard some glorious Bible truth and couldn't contain herself. Out came a loud "Hallelujah!" Two elders sitting near her gave her a stern look.

For a few minutes she was quiet. Then another wonderful truth gripped her heart and she just caught herself in the nick of time from emitting another word of praise. But five minutes later, when the preacher spoke words that again thrilled her soul, she broke forth with, "Blankets or no blankets, praise the Lord, Hallelujah!"

## FUNERALS

Someone thinking to have some fun with the preacher, managed to unload a dying donkey on the preacher's doorstep in the middle of the night. When the parson found it in the morning the donkey was dead. He called the veterinarian, "Doc, there's a dead donkey in front of my house."

In on the prank, the doctor answered, "Don't you ministers take care of the dead?"

"That's right, we do," came the reply. "But first we get in touch with their relatives."

\* \* \* \* \*

A man who hadn't lived the best kind of life passed away. At the funeral the preacher gave a flowery description of the man, telling what a good husband and father he had been. Finally, the wife leaned over to her little boy and whispered, "Go up and see if that's your daddy in that coffin."

\* \* \* \* \*

An English soldier in a French village saw a wedding procession come out of a church. Asking whose wedding it was, he was informed by a Frenchman, "Je ne sais pas." A few hours later the same soldier saw a coffin going into the same church. Curiosity gained the better of him, so he asked the identity of the individual. "Je ne sais pas," was the answer. "Wowie," exclaimed the soldier, "he didn't last long."

## GOSSIP

I've got something to tell you," whispered the gossip. "But listen carefully, because I can tell this only once. You see, I promised not to repeat it."

\* \* \* \* \*

A month after arrival in a different church, the new pastor learned that a rumor had circulated about him. In effect it said that he had taken his wife to a concert after prayer meeting, had bawled her out as they sat on the front row, then had marched her down the aisle before the concert was over, arguing with her all the way down the aisle.

He let the rumor circulate for a few weeks, then decided to spike it. During the announcements on a Sunday morning he said, "The story is not true – for four reasons. First, I wouldn't take my wife to a concert after prayer meeting. Second, I wouldn't argue with her in public. Third, I wouldn't create such a scene by marching her down the aisle while the program was still on. And finally, I'm not married."

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's my policy never to say anything about anyone unless it is something good." The speaker paused, "And, boy, is this good!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A lady went to her minister and said she liked him but for one thing. "I'd like to take a scissors and shorten your tie." He kindly agreed. When she was through he asked the same privilege, adding he would like to shorten something on her.

When she reluctantly agreed, he replied, "Put out your tongue!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A lady was showing a church friend her neighbor's wash through her back window. "Our neighbor isn't very clean. Look at those streaks on the wash!"

Replied her friend, "Those streaks aren't on your neighbor's wash. They're on your window."

\* \* \* \* \*

A friend called at a home to speak to Mrs. Antwerp, a fine lady but one whose tongue made life rather miserable for all in the home. The maid opened the door. "I'm sorry, but Mrs. Antwerp isn't here. She's at adult education school taking a course in 'domestic silence.'"

## GRACE AT MEALS

A little boy went out to dinner with an uncle he had never met. At the restaurant the boy, who had been taught to ask the blessing before meals, bowed his head and said grace. The uncle looked surprised and began eating. "Don't you pray at meals, uncle?" asked the nephew. The uncle said no. "Oh, I see," said the lad, "you're just like my dog – you start right in!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A man used to often grumble at the food placed before him at mealtime. Then he would ask the blessing.

One day after his usual combination complaint and prayer his little girl asked, "Daddy, does God hear us when we pray?"

To teach his daughter a lesson on prayer the father promptly replied, "Why of course, He hears our prayers."

"And does He hear everything we say?"

"Of course," the father said, hoping to teach an additional lesson.

"Then, which does God believe?"

\* \* \* \* \*

A Christian farmer spent the day in the city. In a restaurant for his noon meal, he sat near a group of young men. After he bowed his head to give thanks for his food, one of the young men thought he would embarrass the old gentleman. "Hey, farmer, does everyone do that out where you live?"

The old man calmly replied. "No, son, the pigs don't!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A little girl was asked if she ever offered a prayer at meal-time. Her answer, "Oh, no! We don't have to. My mother is a good cook!"

### HABITS

When making the announcements, a minister had the peculiar habit of placing his thumbs in his vest pockets and patting his stomach with his hands. One Sunday he said, "Monday night will be teachers' meeting." Then he patted his stomach. "Wednesday will be mid-week service." Again he patted his stomach. "And Friday we're going to have a great dinner." And he patted his stomach, then while continuing the patting added, "The purpose of this feed is to enlarge this place."

\* \* \* \* \*

Two preachers were known for their large appetites. A mutual friend decided to run a contest to see which could consume more food. He took them to a restaurant where each ate to his heart's content. When one had reached the limit, the other then started. The second one devoured two steaks, one turkey, two helpings of mashed potatoes, two dishes of corn, two quarts of ice cream, four cups of coffee, one cake and two pies. He won the contest.

Accepting congratulations on the way out, the winner replied, "Please don't tell my wife, or else she won't feed me when I get home!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A clergyman in Great Britain was doing visitation on his motorcycle. Like most of his fellow-ministers he wore his collar buttoned in the back. The afternoon was raw and sleety. Making a turn he skidded on the slippery street into a telephone pole. The accident was evidently serious. The first to arrive on the scene was a simple-headed boy who tried to help. But when the police arrived the preacher was dead. They asked the boy how the victim was when he had found him. "Well," he said, "when I arrived he was still alive but in bad shape. He had hit the pole so hard it had knocked his head all the way around so that the back of his collar was in front. By the time I got his head around he was dead." (From *Christ, His Cross and His Church*, by Vernon McGee, used by permission.)

\* \* \* \* \*

A preacher had a hobby he was always riding. Every sermon he preached somehow brought in baptism. To cure him the deacons hit upon the idea of selecting his text for him and giving it to him while he was in the pulpit. The preacher agreed. The first text they read to him was, "20 axes."

He seemed puzzled. "20 axes," he repeated. "I don't know what anyone would want with 20 axes unless it would be to go down to the river and cut a hole in the ice so one could have a baptismal service."

### INFIDELS

The philosopher, David Hume, wrote an essay on the sufficiency of the light of nature for man's spiritual needs. A noted minister, F. W. Robertson, published a sermon upholding the opposite thesis, pointing out that the light of nature needs to be supplemented by the light of a revelation from God. The two were brought together by mutual friends to debate the matter. When the evening ended, Hume rose to leave. Robertson took a light to show him the way. Hume protested, "Don't worry about me. I always find the light of nature sufficient." But opening the door, he stumbled over something on the steps and tumbled into the street. Robertson jumped down beside him, and holding up his light over the prostrate philosopher to see that he was not hurt, softly but firmly said, "You need a little light from above."

\* \* \* \* \*

An Episcopal clergyman took a seat in a dining car on a train traveling along the Hudson River. Opposite him was an atheist who seeing the clerical collar started a discussion. "I see you are a clergyman."

"Yes," came the reply, "I am a minister of the Gospel."

"I suppose you believe the Bible."

The clergyman, orthodox in his views, responded, "I certainly do believe the Bible to be the Word of God."

"But aren't there things in the Bible you can't explain?"

With humility the minister answered, "Yes, there are places in the Bible too hard for me to understand."

With an air of triumph as though he had conquered the preacher he asked, "Well, what do you do then?"

Unruffled, the clergyman went on eating his dinner that happened to be Hudson shad, a tasty fish but noted for its bony structure. Looking up he said, "Sir, I do just the same as when eating this shad. When I come to the bones, I put them to the side of the plate and go on enjoying my lunch. I leave the bones for some fool to choke on." (From *The Practical Epistle of James* by Frank Gaebelein. Used by permission of *Channel Press*.)

\* \* \* \* \*

An outdoor gospel service was in progress. A listener began to heckle the preacher, "Christianity hasn't done much good. It's been in the world for 1900 years and look at the state of the world!"

Without batting an eyelash, the speaker retorted, "And soap has been in the world longer than that and look at the dirt on your face!"

### INTRODUCTIONS

A speaker failed to show up for a special service in a small country church. After an unsuccessful search for a substitute, it was learned that a bishop was in town for a holiday. Told of the situation, he consented to speak. In introducing him, the church warden in charge of the service said, "We certainly appreciate the bishop's willingness to help out. We feel bad about bothering such an important man, but we did try hard to find a poorer speaker, but couldn't."

\* \* \* \* \*

During his Scotland crusade, Billy Graham had occasion to attend a formal dinner in a castle. He rented some dress clothes. Everywhere were men in top hats and striped trousers. Graham turned to a perfectly attired man at the banquet, "Your grace, I don't believe we've met."

The man replied, "I'm your waiter, Sir."

\* \* \* \* \*

A certain minister was noted for his ability to take a good offering. To the amusement of his parishioners, a lady in the congregation who had trouble pronouncing the word "reverend", introduced him to a friend as "Revenue" Smith.

\* \* \* \* \*

The theological professor moaned to his wife, "I'm not popular enough with the fellows to rate a nickname."

"Oh, yes, you are," replied the wife. "You do have one. They call you Sanka."

Later that evening the professor's curiosity overcame him and he searched the kitchen till he found a package of Sanka. The label read, "More than 98% of the active portion of the bean has been removed."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. V. R. Edman, president of Wheaton College, was introduced to a lady at a Bible conference. Months later, in another service, she approached with the \$64,000 question, "Do you remember me?"

Dr. Edman, who meets thousands of people annually, has a remarkable ability to recall names. "Yes," came the reply. "You are Mrs. White. I met you at the conference."

"No," she corrected, "my name is Snow!"

### JOY

A junk man came down the street where a woman was sweeping her walk.

"Any old beer bottles?"

Self-righteously the woman retorted, "Do I look like the kind of person who would drink beer?"

"Pardon me," apologized the junk man. "Any old vinegar bottles?"

\* \* \* \* \*

A businessman wanted to perform some service. At his pastor's suggestion he stood outside the rescue mission on Skid Row inviting the down-and-outers inside. Stopping one unfortunate, the

businessman in a most doleful tone invited him in. The down-and-outer took one look at his mournful face and answered, "No, thanks. I have enough troubles of my own!"

## LARGE, FAMILIES

A young couple sent a friend a playpen on the arrival of their sixth child. Her letter of thanks took them by surprise. "The pen is just what we needed," she wrote. "I sit in it every afternoon and read, and the kids can't get near me!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The parents of a large family reached the entrance to the zoo. A sign read, "Admission, 50¢ per family." Herding his fourteen children through the gate, the father handed the ticket collector a fifty-cent piece. "Are all these your children?" he asked in open-mouthed amazement.

"Every single one of them."

"Well, here's your fifty cents back," said the ticket collector. "It's worth more for the animals to see your family than for your family to see the animals!"

\* \* \* \* \*

In the midwest lived a large family of children, from a toddler to a big brother over six feet tall. This family never ceased to be a cause of wonder to a little girl across the road. One day some paratroopers, whom the family had never seen, began to practice jumping over their farms. The little girl ran to her mother. "Look, mother, the stork's bringing them full-grown now."

\* \* \* \* \*

A mother with one child called at a home where there were seven youngsters. Seeing their smooth-running household, she asked the parents if they had any domestic help. "Surely with all these children and all the washing, ironing, dishes and cleaning, you must have some outside help."

At this point the father proudly answered, "No, we don't need any. You see – we raise our own!"

## MARRIAGE

Because of a shortage of maids, the minister's wife advertised for a man servant. The next morning a nicely dressed young man came to the front door.

"Can you start the breakfast by seven o'clock?" asked the minister.

"I guess so," answered the man.

"Can you polish all the silver, wash all the dishes, do the laundry, take care of the lawn, wash windows, iron clothes and keep the house neat and tidy?"

"Say, preacher," said the young fellow rather meekly, "I came here to see about getting married – but if it's going to be as much work as all that, you can count me out right now."

\* \* \* \* \*

A Sunday-school teacher returning from work one day heard his little boy and girl quarreling violently with each other. It looked as if they were coming to blows. "Children, why are you fighting so?"

The little boy answered with an airy smile, "Why, father, we aren't quarreling really; we're just playing mother and father."

\* \* \* \* \*

A soldier in the front lines in Korea was having domestic difficulties. His wife would send him annoying letters. Unable to stand it any longer, he wrote her, "Stop arguing with me. I want to fight this war in peace!"

\* \* \* \* \*

When hubby, a church deacon, arrived home from work, his wife had news. "The maid quit. She said you spoke insultingly to her on the phone."

Said the husband, "Oh, I thought I was talking to you!"

\* \* \* \* \*

William Jennings Bryan, posing for a portrait, was asked by the artist, "Why do you wear your hair over your ears?"

Mr. Bryan answered, "There's a romance connected with that. When I began courting Mrs. Bryan she objected to the way my ears stood out. So to please her, I let my hair grow to cover them."

"But that was many years ago," said the artist. "Why don't you have your hair cut now?"

"Because," twinkled Bryan, "the romance is still going on."

\* \* \* \* \*

A husband who was experiencing marital troubles was asked, 'Were you married by the justice of the peace?'

"Yes," came the reply, "but they should have called him the secretary of war."

\* \* \* \* \*

A teen-age girl was examining her grandmother's wedding ring.

"Wow," said the girl, "what heavy and cumbersome rings those were fifty years ago!"

"True," said the grandmother, "but don't forget that in my day they were made to last a lifetime!"

### MISSIONARIES

A missionary family serving in the Belgian Congo had just finished their meal. Then came time for family devotions. One of the boys wanted to know what the Bible meant when it spoke of Christians being the salt of the earth. The explanation satisfied him at the time, but when he was being tucked into bed, he asked, "If we are the salt, who is the pepper?"

\* \* \* \* \*

A missionary and his wife lived in a cabin in Alaska. One night the temperature clipped to twenty degrees below zero. The wood fire burned out at two in the morning. Inside the cabin the thermometer dropped to zero. The wife tried to get the fire rekindled. She stood there in her night clothes shivering. Her husband was a tender-hearted man. As he reclined in comparative comfort with the blankets pulled up around his neck he couldn't bear the sight of her shivering. So he pulled the bed clothes up higher to, cover his eyes and froze his feet because of his tender heart.

### PASTORS' WIVES

When a minister was dressing before making some pastoral calls he couldn't find his cuff-links. He fumed, fussed and fretted around the house, then stormed in a rage. His wife was in tears by the time he left. His first call was, at the home of an old lady, who because of a stroke was confined to her bed. Yet she was most cheerful. Next he called on a middle-aged man who had just been informed his condition was incurable. Yet the parishioner showed no resentment. His final visit was to a semi shut-in, a poor old lady whose only room was an attic. Yet she was sweetly looking forward to her heavenly home.

Back home he exclaimed to his wife, "Honey, how wonderful is God's grace. Nothing is too hard for it!"

"It is marvelous," replied his wife, "but there is one thing it doesn't seem to have the power to do."

"What's that?" puzzled the preacher.

"It doesn't seem to have the power to control the minister's temper when his cuff-links are misplaced!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A minister spotted a woman coming up the front walk. Looking more closely, he saw it was his leading trouble-maker, Mrs. Queen. Hiding in his study he let his wife handle the caller. An hour later he opened, his study door and hearing nothing, called down to his wife, "Has that terrible gossip gone?"

The visitor was still there. There was a moment of painful silence, then the minister's wife called up, "Yes, she went sometime ago, but Mrs. Queen is here now!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A pastor had received a call from another church to become its minister. The pastor's twelve-year-old son was talking with a neighbor. "Dad's upstairs praying about it, but Mother's downstairs packing."

### PHARISEES

A minister asked a man, "Why don't you go to church?"

Quick as a flash he answered, "The dying thief didn't join a church and he went to heaven."

"Have you been baptized?" the questions continued.

"The dying thief never did," came the answer.

"Do you give to missions?"

"No, the dying thief never did."

"Well," said the minister, "the only difference between you and that fellow is that he was a dying thief and you are a living one."

\* \* \* \* \*

Invariably after a service a lady would say to her pastor, "Boy, didn't you give it to them this morning!" Or, "You surely preached to them today!"

One Sunday morning the weather was so bad that only she came. After the service she went to her pastor, "If they had been here, they would have surely gotten it!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A lady said to the preacher at the door, "Everything you said in your sermon was wonderful and fitted someone or other I know."

### PRAYERS

The pastor asked Bobby, "Do you say your prayers every night?"

"Not every night. Some nights I don't want anything!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The day before Christmas was a hectic one. Father was worried with bundles and burdens. Mother's nerves reached the breaking point more than once. The little girl seemed to be in the way wherever she went. Finally, she was hustled up to bed. As she knelt to pray, the feverish excitement so mixed her up, she said, "Forgive us our Christmases, as we forgive those who Christmas against us."

\* \* \* \* \*

A young salesman went to his minister with a problem. "I would like to get married but I don't make quite enough to support a wife. And my girl is getting tired of waiting. What should I do?"

The minister thought for a moment, then said, "Why don't you pray for a raise?"

"Oh, no," exclaimed the young man, "I couldn't do that. You see, my boss doesn't like me to go over his head."

\* \* \* \* \*

A little girl was overheard by her mother asking God to make Boston the capital of Vermont. "Why do you pray like that?" the mother asked.

"Because I said so on my geography exam this afternoon!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A church member who owed money to another member and who was quite slow about paying back the loan prayed in the mid-week meeting, "Give us faith – a devil-driving faith." Under his breath the brother to whom he owed the money prayed, "Amen, and give us a debt-paying faith, too!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A farmer whose barns were full of corn used to pray, "O Lord, supply the needs of the poor; please feed them." Yet when anyone in need asked for corn he would reply that he had none to spare.

One day his little boy, overhearing his father pray for the needy, said, "Daddy, I wish I had your corn."

"What would you do with it?"

"I'd answer your prayer."

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam Clarke, writer of a Bible commentary, was an early morning riser. A young preacher wanted to know the eminent theologian's secret. "Do you pray about it?" he asked.

"No," was the reply, "I just get up!"

### SERMONS – LONG

The sexton had been laying new carpet on the pulpit platform and had left several tacks scattered on the floor. "See here," said the parson, "what do you suppose would happen if I stepped on a tack right in the middle of my sermon?"

"I guess there'd be one point you wouldn't linger on."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sermon was running overtime. Suddenly a lady remembered she had left her oven on. She wrote a note to her husband, who without looking at it but just out of habit because he was an usher,

walked up the aisle and handed it to the preacher. This is what he read, "Go home and turn off the gas!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The sermons were always just twenty minutes in length. One day the preacher went one hour and twenty minutes. When asked why, he explained, I always put a life-saver in my mouth and when it melts I know the twenty minutes are up. But in my hurry I put a button in my mouth by mistake!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A man who hadn't gone to church in his life went to his first service. His friend tried to answer his questions. When the pastor came on the platform, the newcomer asked, "What does this mean?" and his friend explained. When they sang the doxology, he asked, "What does that mean?" and the friend told him. When the offering plate was passed, he wanted to know all about it. After the minister had preached thirty minutes, he took his watch out. "What does that mean?" asked the stranger.

Replied the friend, "Doesn't mean a thing!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A homiletics student asked his professor if a good beginning and a good ending were the makings of a good sermon.

The professor replied, "Yes, if they come close enough together!"

\* \* \* \* \*

On a blizzardy Sunday morning only two showed up for church, the preacher and one member. "Should we have a service?" the preacher asked.

"I'm just a farmer," the parishioner replied, "but if it were feeding time on my farm and only one animal showed up, I'd feed him."

So the preacher announced a hymn and the congregation joined in. He prayed, read the Bible, made the announcements, took up the offering. Then he preached for a whole hour. After the service the preacher asked the member how he liked it.

Came the answer, "I'm only a farmer, but if at feeding time only one animal showed up, I'd feed him. However, I wouldn't give him the whole bag of feed."

\* \* \* \* \*

A retired bishop was once asked by a newly-ordained preacher, "What should I preach about?"

The elderly man thought a moment, then replied, "Preach about God and preach about twenty minutes."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sermon had gone on a long, long, time. A visitor leaned over to the person next to him and whispered, "How long has he been preaching?"

The reply, "Almost thirty years."

"Oh," said the stranger, "guess I'll stay. He ought to be through soon."

\* \* \* \* \*

Orating endlessly on the immortality of the soul, the preacher said, "Mountains, beautiful as you are, you will be destroyed, while my soul will not. Ocean, mighty as you are, you will eventually dry up, but not I."

### SERMONS – LOUD

A minister's son was asked, "Does your father ever preach the same sermon twice?"

After a moment's reflection he replied, "Yes, he does; but I think he hollers in different places!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A minister prayed loudly. His voice thundered through the sanctuary. A little boy was asked what he thought of the prayer. He thought a minute, then answered, "If that man lived nearer to God he wouldn't have to pray so loud."

\* \* \* \* \*

A husband, unable to attend church on a Sunday morning when a preacher was a candidate for the pulpit, asked his wife, "Was he sound?"

Her reply, "He was all sound!"

### SERMON PREPARATION

A small daughter watched her father prepare a sermon. "Daddy, does God tell you what to say?"

"Of course, my child," her father answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Then why do you scratch so much of it out?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"With your gift of gab," said a young minister to an older, successful clergyman, "I wonder why you spend so much time on your sermons. Many are the times I've written a sermon and caught a fish before breakfast."

"Well," replied the mature preacher, "all I can say is, I'd rather have eaten your fish than listened to your sermon!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Young preacher: "You don't mean to tell me you spend hours preparing a sermon. Doesn't the Bible promise that when we speak our mouths will be filled?"

Older preacher: "Yes, but the filling is back farther and up a little higher."

\* \* \* \* \*

Spurgeon told about a vicar who had heard his bishop deliver a stirring lecture on the need for diligent study. After the lecture the vicar disagreed with the bishop. "Why," said the vicar, "often when I am in the vestry I do not know what I'm going to talk about, but I go into the pulpit and preach and think nothing of it."

The bishop replied, "And you are quite right in thinking nothing of it, for your church officials have told me they share your opinion!"

### SERMONS – REACTIONS

A minister was presenting the truth that God knows who best grows in the sunshine experiences of life and also who best develops most in the shade. He illustrated, "You know that you plant roses in the sun, but if you want your scarlet shrubs known as fuchsias to grow they must be kept in a shady corner."

After the service a lady said, "Reverend, you don't know how much your sermon helped me." The preacher beamed. His sense of achievement soared till the woman added, "I never did realize before just why my fuchsias wouldn't grow!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A preacher invited the third time to a church had unwittingly preached the same sermon each time. He was presented with a gift as he boarded the train. Opening the package he found a watch without any mechanism inside. Instead there was a note which read, "If you ever preach that same sermon here again we'll give you the works."

\* \* \* \* \*

A man who attended the morning service never came at night. One day the preacher asked him why. "I simply can't digest more than one sermon a day."

Suggested the preacher, "I rather think the fault is with the appetite rather than the digestion."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Silent Cal" Coolidge was once asked after a Sunday morning church service what the preacher's subject had been. He replied, "Sin."

"What did the preacher say about sin?" the questioner continued.

Coolidge answered, "He was against it."

\* \* \* \* \*

A long-winded sermonizer was shaking hands with his congregation at the door. One of them, a little mixed up, instead of calling him "reverend", said, "neverend".

A minister, a doctor of divinity, lived with his son who was a medical doctor. One day the phone rang and the minister answered.

"Is this the doctor speaking?"

"Yes."

"Are you the one who preaches or the one who practices?"

Next day when the maid answered and a voice asked for the doctor, she asked, "Which one do you want, pills or prayer?"

\* \* \* \* \*

A New England minister, called to a new parish, preached the same sermon three Sundays in a row. After the third Sunday, a committee called on him. "We don't like to suggest what you preach, but we do hope you could see your way clear to preach on a different subject next week."

The new pastor replied, "I see no evidence that the sermon I have preached has produced any effect. When the people begin to practice it, I shall gladly preach another!"

\* \* \* \* \*

During the announcements the pastor stated he would like the board to remain for a short meeting after church. The official board stayed plus one man. When it was explained to this stranger that this was a meeting of the board, he replied, "That's why I stayed. I'm bored."

\* \* \* \* \*

A minister bought butter from a lady member of his congregation. One day he was ten cents short for his pound of butter. "That's all right," said the sales-lady. "I'll take it out in preaching."

Rather annoyed, the pastor replied, "But I don't have any ten-cent sermons."

"Oh, that's all right. I'll hear you twice!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Folks," said the preacher, "the subject of my sermon tonight is 'Liars'. How many in the congregation have read the thirty-ninth chapter of Mark?" Nearly every hand went up immediately. "You're just the folks I want to preach to. Mark has only sixteen chapters".

### SERMONS - STEALING

Billy Sunday, it is said, sometimes took other preachers' sermons and preached them. Once after he had preached one of Gypsy Smith's sermons, Gypsy took him to task. "You preached my sermon almost word for word," he accused Sunday.

"But after you preached it that night I heard you," said Sunday, "you sang, 'Pass It On', and that's what I'm doing."

\* \* \* \* \*

One day Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, great Bible expositor, walked into a meeting where Mel Trotter, converted drunkard, was about to preach. Trotter was startled because he was going to preach one of Morgan's sermons. After the service Trotter apologized to Morgan for using one of his sermons.

Morgan seemed surprised and said, "Don't charge that thing up to me."

### SEXTON

A man stood wistfully at the edge of the crowd as it peppered the bride and groom with confetti that cluttered up the church entrance in unsightly fashion. "Are you related to the bride? Are you thinking of the past when she was just a little girl?"

"No," was the reply, "I'm the sexton thinking of tomorrow!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The sexton of a large church which had meetings of one kind or another scheduled every day had many extra demands shoved on him. Asked how he could maintain an even disposition with all the aggravation, he explained, "I just puts my feelings in neutral and lets them push me around!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A sexton was going through the pews after an evening service, straightening up a little. A lady who had lingered to talk with a friend was about to walk away without her purse. Spotting her handbag in the pew, the sexton said, "Don't forget your purse. For if you leave it, someone might find it and think it was an answer to their prayers."

### SLEEPING

At a Sunday dinner table a lady asked her husband, "Did you notice the mink coat on the lady in front of us in church today?"

"No," admitted the husband, "I was dozing".

"Huh," retorted the wife, "a lot of good the sermon did you!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you acquainted with John Jones?"

"I should say I am. We've slept in the same church pew for over twenty years!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A Monday morning lecture was being delivered in a seminary classroom. Many students were drowsily nodding, worn out from the long trips and preaching assignments of the previous day. One young man fell asleep and advertised the fact in no uncertain drone.

“Wake him up!” said the professor to the student next to the sleeper.

In a flash the student retorted, “You wake him up! You put him to sleep!”

### SUNDAY

Six-year-old Robert had been taught that Sunday was not a day for play. One Sunday morning his mother found him sailing his toy boat in a big puddle in the backyard. “Bobby,” she scolded, “don’t you know it’s wicked to sail boats on Sunday?”

“Don’t get excited, Mother,” he matter-of-factly replied. “This isn’t a pleasure trip. This is a missionary boat going to India.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Dining with a family the minister asked, “You never go fishing on Sunday, do you, Bobby?”

“Oh, no, Sir!”

“That’s right, Bobby. Now can you tell me why you don’t go fishing on Sunday?”

“Yes, Sir,” said Bobby. “Pa says he doesn’t want to be bothered with me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A woman was asked if she noticed any change in her husband since he joined the church. “Why, yes, I do,” she reported. “Before he joined, when he did any carpenter work on Sundays, he would carry his hammer and saw on his shoulder. Now he carries them under his coat.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Up near Boston back in the good old nineties a man stole a horse on Saturday night. On Monday morning the police found him very near where he had stolen the horse Saturday night. They asked, “How come you didn’t get away with the horse yesterday?”

The man replied, “Oh, I want you to know I have definite convictions against traveling on Sunday!”

### SUNDAY SCHOOL

Ruth came home from her visit to Sunday school, eating a chocolate bar.

“Where did you get it, Ruth?” asked her father.

“I bought it with the nickel you gave me. The preacher met me at the door and got me in for nothing.”

\* \* \* \* \*

At a Sunday school picnic Mrs. Smith won the ladies’ rolling-pin throwing contest. Mr. Smith won the sixty-yard dash.

\* \* \* \* \*

An early teen-ager dropped into a drugstore on a Sunday morning. It was his first visit there. He asked if he could change a dime into two nickels. As the druggist gave him the change, he said, “Have a good time in Sunday school.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A Sunday school teacher was visiting one of her class members. “Which do you like better – public school or Sunday school?”

Without a moment’s hesitation the little boy replied, “Sunday school.”

The teacher beamed. Then she asked, “Why? Any particular reason?”

“Oh, yes,” said the little boy. “Because I only have to go once a week!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe had been promoted from the primary to the junior department at Sunday school. He was most happy about his progress. Coming out of Sunday school he met his former teacher, whom he liked a great deal and regretted losing as a teacher. “Mr. Smith,” he exclaimed, “I wish you were smart enough to teach me next year!”

A Sunday school teacher was impressing her pupils with the prodigious rate at which light travels. "Just think," she pointed out, "that light comes to us from the sun and stars at the speed of 186,000 miles a second. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Not so much," said Bill. "It's downhill all the way!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A Sunday school teacher was telling his class about the crowns which would be given as rewards to the saints.

"Tell me," he asked his class of boys, "who will get the biggest crown?"

Bobby piped up, "The one that's got the biggest head."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the course of the Sunday school lesson the teacher tried to illustrate a point by speaking of a vacuum. One little fellow didn't know what vacuum meant. So the teacher asked for a volunteer to explain its meaning. One fellow raised his hand immediately.

"A vacuum is . . . a vacuum is, is . . . I know what it is. I can't explain it, but I got it in my head."

### TEMPTATION

A man used to go forward at every consecration meeting. He always prayed the same way, "Take the cobwebs out of my life." The preacher, a little tired of hearing him pray the same petition, knelt down beside him at the altar one night and prayed, "Lord, kill the spider!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A boy was told by his father not to go swimming. The father caught him swimming. "I didn't mean to go swimming," pleaded the boy.

"Why did you bring your bathing suit?"

"Oh," replied the boy, "I brought it along just in case I was tempted."

\* \* \* \* \*

A man was telling how he overcame temptation. "I was in the village store and had a chance to steal a big bag of flour while the storekeeper was out of sight for a minute. But I resisted the impulse," he said virtuously, "and just took a loaf of bread instead."

### TREASURERS

At a side show in a little town a strong man squeezed a lemon dry and offered a reward of \$5.00 to anyone who could squeeze another drop out of the lemon. A slight fellow came forward, took the lemon, and began to squeeze. To the amazement of all, a drop fell, then another, and a third. The astonished strong man asked, "Who are you?"

"Oh," replied the little fellow, "I'm the treasurer of the local church!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The treasurer of the Ladies' Aid took some money to the bank. She said to the teller, "Here's the aid money."

Hard of hearing, the teller thought she said, "Here's the egg money," and replied, "It's surprising what a bunch of old hens can do, isn't it?"

### VISITATION

A minister was calling on parishioners late one afternoon, around the time the men came home from work. Knocking on a door, he heard a woman's voice call out, "Is that you, angel?"

Came the pastor's immediate reply, "No, but I'm from the same department."

\* \* \* \* \*

Woodrow Wilson's father was a minister. Rather tall and thin, Wilson Sr. made quite a contrast to his horse, which was well-built. One day with horse and buggy and young Woodrow along, the minister was asked by a parishioner, "Reverend, how is it that you're so thin and gaunt while your horse is so fat and sleek?"

Before he could reply, young Woodrow exclaimed, "Probably because my father feeds the horse and the congregation feeds my father!"

\* \* \* \* \*

One morning the parsonage phone rang. A minute later the hatless, coatless preacher ran out the door. His wife wondered what could be the matter. She thought of all the sick and offered a silent prayer. She was consumed with curiosity till she was able to ask him on his return, "Whatever was the matter?"

Naming a parishioner who lived down the street, he replied, "She phoned me because the end of the world was coming. She saw 'Peace' in the sky. When I looked up I saw 'Pepsi' written by a sky-writing plane."

\* \* \* \* \*

Three preachers enjoyed a chicken dinner on the farm of a parishioner. After the meal the farmer took them around the yard. Seeing a rooster with its head lifted high, one minister remarked, "That fellow's pretty cocky, isn't he?"

The farmer's son who had been following them around exclaimed, "You'd be cocky too if you just had three sons enter the ministry!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mother," asked the little girl at dinner, "isn't this roast beef we're having?"

"Yes dear, why do you ask?"

Looking right at the visiting minister, she said, "Daddy is such a big tease. He told me we were going to have old muttonhead for dinner tonight!"

## WEDDINGS

A young jeweler was being married. The minister asked for the ring, then gave it to the jeweler to put on his bride's finger. "With this ring," prompted the minister.

"With this ring," the bridegroom nervously repeated, then added, "we give a written guarantee, promising the customer that the price will be refunded if it is not satisfactory."

\* \* \* \* \*

Just before his informal Sunday evening service a minister was approached in his study by a couple wishing to be married. "I'm sorry but I'm just about to go to the platform. The service starts in three minutes," the minister said.

"But we have tickets for a plane that leaves in an hour. We can't wait till the service is over."

The minister thought a minute. "I have an idea. In the early part of the service I'll ask those who wish to be married to come forward and I'll marry you right then."

After the song service the minister stepped down front and asked, "Those who wish to be married, please come forward."

Seven bachelors and fifteen spinsters hurried up the aisle.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How did the wedding go?" the preacher's wife asked.

"Fine," replied the preacher, "till I asked if the bride would 'obey' and she said, 'Do you think I'm crazy?' and the bridegroom in a sort of a daze mumbled, 'I do.' Then the fur began to fly!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Little June at a fashionable wedding didn't miss a single detail. She saw the bride come up the aisle with her father, then go down the aisle with the groom. "Mother, did the lady change her mind? She went up the aisle with one man and came back with a different one!"

\* \* \* \* \*

An usher was passing the collection plate at a big church wedding. A well-dressed lady looked up, most puzzled. Without waiting for her question, the usher nodded his head, "Yes, madam, it is unusual, but the father of the bride requested it."