

## Godly Humour

A Sunday school teacher asked her children, as they were on the way to church service, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" One bright little girl replied, "Because people are sleeping."

A little boy was overheard praying: "Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time like I am."

One summer evening during a violent thunderstorm, a mother was tucking her small boy into bed. She was about to turn off the light when he asked with a tremor in his voice, "Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?"

The mother smiled and gave him a reassuring hug. "I can't, dear," she said. "I have to sleep in Daddy's room."

A long silence was broken at last by his shaky little voice: "The big sissy."

It is odd that humour, something that is so much a part of our daily lives, is talked about so little in the Bible.

We live in a culture in which humour is ever-present: talk shows, sit-coms, TV, movies, and internet videos – it is everywhere.

What part should humour play in a Christian's life? Is a preacher offending God's holiness if he tells a joke in the pulpit? Are humorous observations inappropriate? What about teasing one other as we so often do? Are these things good? Are they bad?

Some people seem to think that being a "real Christian" means you must always be solemn and sombre.

We know that God made us with the capacity for laughter, and he called his creation **good**, so I believe that there **IS** a place for humour in a Christian's life.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 tells us that, just as there is a time to weep, there is also a time to laugh.

There are just over 50 references to laughter in the Bible. It is interesting that many of these references refer to the improper use of humour.

Proverbs 26:18-19 chides those who do something evil and then claim they were only joking.

**Just as damaging as a madman shooting a deadly weapon is someone who lies to a friend and then says, "I was only joking."**

This is similar to the common blogging practice of saying something mean and hurtful and either tagging it as humour or attaching a smiley face to it – as if that makes up for all the nastiness.

But there are other references where laughter seems to be more positive. Abraham and Sarah laughed at the absurdity of being parents at ages 99 and 89, and named their son Isaac, based on the root word in Hebrew for *laughter*. Their laughter was not meant derisively but as an expression of joy and astonishment over the absurdity of the situation.

In Genesis 21:6-7 we read: *And Sarah declared, "God has brought me laughter. All who hear about this will laugh with me. <sup>7</sup>Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse a baby? Yet I have given Abraham a son in his old age!"*

In Psalm 2:4 we read that God laughs derisively at the nations that rage against him – picturing that He is not threatened by them in any way. God, too, is able to see the absurdity of the situation.

And in Psalm 126:1-3 we read:

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,*

*we were like those who dreamed.*

*<sup>2</sup>Our mouths were filled with laughter,*

*our tongues with songs of joy.*  
Then it was said among the nations,  
“The Lord has done great things for them.”  
<sup>3</sup>The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.

In the Lukan version of the beatitudes (Luke 6:20-21) we are told:

*Then Jesus turned to his disciples and said,  
“God blesses you who are poor,  
for the Kingdom of God is yours.  
God blesses you who are hungry now,  
for you will be satisfied.  
God blesses you who weep now,  
for in due time you will laugh.*

This is, of course, a reference to the joy that Jesus will bring into our lives.

Even though joyous laughter is not mentioned frequently in the Bible, there are numerous references to joy and rejoicing, and it is hard to imagine such emotion without the physical act of laughter being part of the package. In fact, the word JOY is mentioned over 300 times in the Bible. And laughter is an audible expression of that.

So what are the characteristics of godly humour?

In Eph 5:4 the apostle Paul tells us: *Obscene stories, foolish talk, and coarse jokes—these are not for you. Instead, let there be thankfulness to God.*

I like to tell stories that make people laugh. But just like the passage from Ephesians 5:4, I had to learn that not all humour is appropriate.

Here are a few thoughts about Christians and humour.

1) Obviously, Christian humour is not obscene. Rude, crude, obscene, sexually explicit joking are directly forbidden in several verses, most notably Eph 5:4, which we just read.

But it seems obvious that there is more to this than a simple admonition against dirty jokes. I’ve observed people who wouldn’t think of telling a dirty joke say extremely hurtful things to others, or about others, and call it humour.

2) Christian humour must not destroy, it must build up. We, as Christians, cannot use our humour to deride, belittle or hurt others and then hide behind the “I was only kidding” defence. That is a tactic unworthy of Godly men and women.

Humour can brighten dark times. This is a natural response. When things are difficult, dark and threatening, an appropriate joke can lighten the mood and help everyone to see that all is not lost. A little humour can remind us that there is hope and joy even in dark times.

3) A Christian takes responsibility for his or her humour.

There have been times when I have teased someone and it has hurt their feelings. Maybe I went too far. Maybe they misunderstood me. But if I am the one who tells the joke, I must be responsible for my words. If there is a misunderstanding, I should clarify. I must take responsibility for my jokes. **I cannot pass the buck by blaming the problem on the other’s lack of a sense of humour. If my humour offends, I must make amends.**

4) Christian humour should tend toward the self-deprecating. If I am going to use humour, it should most often be at my own expense than it is at others’ expense. If your humour tends to build you up at others’ expense, it is probably not God-honouring.

5) God is beyond our jokes.

I don't tell jokes about God. He is holy and awesome. We human beings are frail and silly and funny little things. Humour about our situation or our own failings is justified. When you read the stories of people transported into heaven they are generally falling down in awe. They are not laughing. Jokes about God are totally inappropriate.

Secular studies show that laughter is good for you.

Here are some comments from the Mayo clinic, a prestigious medical establishment:

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Whether you're guffawing at a sitcom on TV or quietly giggling at a newspaper cartoon, laughing does you good. Laughter is a great form of stress relief, and that's no joke.

A good sense of humour can't cure all ailments, but data is mounting about the positive things laughter can do.

A good laugh has great short-term effects. When you start to laugh, it doesn't just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body.

Laughter can:

**Stimulate many organs.** Laughter stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain.

**Activate and relieve your stress response.** A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response, and it can increase and then decrease your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling.

**Soothe tension.** Laughter can also stimulate circulation and aid muscle relaxation, both of which can help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

**Laughter also has long-term effects**

Laughter isn't just a quick pick-me-up. It's also good for you over the long term. Laughter may:

**Improve your immune system.** Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can affect your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. By contrast, positive thoughts can actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more-serious illnesses.

**Relieve pain.** Laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers.

**Increase personal satisfaction.** Laughter can also make it easier to cope with difficult situations. It also helps you connect with other people.

**Improve your mood.** Many people experience depression, sometimes due to chronic illnesses. Laughter can help lessen your stress, depression and anxiety and may make you feel happier. It can also improve your self-esteem.

Are you afraid that you have an underdeveloped — or even non-existent — sense of humour? No problem. Humour can be learned. In fact, developing or refining your sense of humour may be easier than you think.

- Find a few simple items, such as photos, greeting cards or comic strips, that make you chuckle. Then hang them up at home or in your office, or collect them in a file or notebook. Keep funny movies, TV shows, books, magazines or comedy videos on hand for when you need an added humour boost. Look online at joke websites or silly videos (The gods must be crazy).
- **Laugh and the world laughs with you.** Find a way to laugh about your own situations and watch your stress begin to fade away. Even if it feels forced at first, practice laughing. It does your body good.
- **Share a laugh.** Make it a habit to spend time with friends who make you laugh. And then return the favour by sharing funny stories or jokes with those around you.
- **Know what isn't funny.** Don't laugh at the expense of others. Some forms of humour aren't appropriate. Use your best judgment to discern a good joke from a bad or hurtful one.

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And the web-site **HelpGuide.org** adds the following:

Laughter decreases stress hormones and increases immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies, thus improving your resistance to disease.

Laughter protects the heart. Mirthful laughter improves the function of blood vessels, lowers blood pressure, and increases blood flow. These effects can help protect you against a heart attack and other cardiovascular problems.

**Laughter may even help you to live longer. A study in Norway found that people with a strong sense of humour outlived those who don't laugh as much. The difference was particularly notable for those battling cancer.**

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A good insight on the healing power of laughter is the 1998 movie called "Patch Adams" where Robin Williams plays the part of the real-life innovative medical doctor "Patch" Adams, who also co-authored the book *Good Health Is a Laughing Matter*.

While in that remote village in Mexico, translating the NT for the Chinantec people, we were going through a very stressful time. One night, while sitting up in bed, I said to Christine – You know, we haven't laughed in a long time. We need a good laugh. Let's see how many puns we can make on the topic of "Stove".

Well, there was quite a **range** of comments. Some were quite **elemental** or only **half-baked**, but before long we were **boiling** over with enthusiasm. We got sillier and sillier, and laughed until our sides ached. What a release from tension!

**So, let's loosen up our laugh muscles with a bit of humour lifted from actual church bulletins...**

- Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.
- Next Thursday there will be try-outs for the choir. They need all the help they can get.
- Irving Benson and Jessie Carter were married on October 24 in the church. So ends a friendship that began in their schooldays.
- At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be 'What Is Hell?' Come early and listen to our choir practice.
- Eight new choir robes are currently needed due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.
- The church will host an evening of fine dining, super entertainment and gracious hostility.
- Pot-luck supper Sunday at 5:00 PM – prayer and medication to follow.
- This evening at 7PM there will be hymn singing in the park across from the Church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.
- Barbara remains in the hospital and needs blood donors for more transfusions. She is also having trouble sleeping and requests tapes of Pastor Jack's sermons.
- The eighth-graders will be presenting Shakespeare's Hamlet in the Church basement Friday at 7PM. The congregation is invited to attend this tragedy.
- And here's an announcement in a church bulletin for a National Prayer and Fasting Conference: "The cost for attending the Fasting and Prayer Conference... includes meals."

If anything can be learned from these typographical errors and unintended innuendos, it is that proofreading a public document is worth the time and effort.

CHILDREN'S LETTERS TO THEIR PASTOR:

Dear Pastor, I know God loves everybody but He never met my sister.

Dear Pastor, I didn't get a raise in my allowance. Could you have a sermon about a raise in my allowance?

Dear Pastor, please say a prayer for our Little League team. We need God's help or a new pitcher.

**Here's some humorous medical advice:** Never, under any circumstances, take a sleeping pill and a laxative on the same night.

**Truth wrapped up in humour:** "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car."

And, whether you like cats or not, if you want a goood laugh, take time to watch some funny cat videos. There are lots of them on the internet.

**Bring humour into conversations.**

**At morning tea today, after church,** ask people, "What's the funniest thing that happened to you today? This week? In your life?"

Don't go a day without laughing. Think of it like exercise or breakfast and make a conscious effort to find something each day that makes you laugh. The more you get used to laughing each day, the less effort you'll have to make.

And, as Christians, we have far more reasons to be joyful and laugh than those who don't yet know Christ as their Saviour.

In the Gospel of John 15:11-12 Jesus says:

*I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! <sup>12</sup> This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.*

*("Your joy will overflow" sure sounds like laughter to me!)*

The apostle Paul says in Romans 15:13

*I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

And in 2 Corinthians 13:11 Paul writes:

*Dear brothers and sisters, I close my letter with these last words: Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you.*