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THE HUMOR OF JESUS

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~ Scripture: Matthew 7:1-5 ~

INTRODUCTION

There was a book published back in 1964 entitled The Humor of Christ, by Elton Trueblood. There was another one that came out about the same time entitled Serve Him With Mirth, by Leslie B. Flynn. Goodness knows we needed books like those back then, because the church had gotten to be pretty formal, stodgy, stiff. Along with the rest of society, we have loosened up a lot since then. Humor certainly is much more a part of our lives as believers. . .and now seen as vital in Christian ministry.

Still, people today criticize Christians for being so serious-minded, so humorless. And church services for being too somber, too solemn. [Sometimes they need to be. We aim for a balance.] And there is still the stereotype of Jesus—of one who rarely smiles or laughs.

Where did we get that idea?

It probably comes from the Middle Ages when laughter was incompatible with deity. There could be no emotion. . .nothing whimsical in a God who is perfect, holy, righteous.

Nothing could be further from the truth. That would leave us with a God who takes no delight in His creation. . .who can't enjoy His creatures.

I don't see God that way. When we go outdoors and walk around and see the things God has made, it brings a smile to our face. Last week, Marcie & I took a day off to go to the **ZOO**. We saw some truly humorous things. At times we were doubled over with laughter.

At one point, we came around a bend and saw three PECCARIES—medium-sized pig-like animals with long legs; from the southern part of Texas on down to Argentina. When we walked by, Marcie exclaimed, "O look, little pigs." At exactly that moment, two of the three turned their heads (as if perfectly synchronized) and looked straight at us as if to say, "Hey, we're not pigs. . . we're Peccaries." ☺

One time we were walking through the **KELLOGG BIRD SANCTUARY**. [It's a place we try to get to every year. God's sense of humor is so evident there.] We saw some Blue Herons. There were some ducks hanging out on a fence post that stretched out into the water. All of a sudden, a big Blue Heron came and plopped down in the middle of where the ducks were sitting. He stretched his big wings, and knocked the ducks off into the water below. You can't see comedy like that on any TV or movie screen. ☺

It's hard for me to imagine a GOD who would infuse that much humor into His creation as being stiff-necked. JESUS certainly wasn't. How could one who was so popular with children AND who encouraged those who followed him to become as little children not be given to some mirth & merriment? How could one who told His followers to hold off fasting while He was around because they were in essence at a wedding party not be jovial? [cf. Matthew 9:15]

Humor was very much a part of Jesus' personality / his emotional make-up / and his ministry:

- He was not, as some have imagined Him, “grave in speech, and serious to the point of dourness” (wrote Elton Trueblood in that book I mentioned a moment ago).
- But neither was He a stand-up comedian. His humor was not smack-you-in-the-face, belly-laugh, punch-line funny. It was subtle, astute, clever.

Problem is, much of Jesus’ humor is “lost in translation”. That’s because there is such a huge cultural and linguistic gap between us and the Gospels. But His laughter is there—the word-plays, the puns, the irony. His wit and his laughter can be heard, but you have to dig for it.

Let’s look at a few SAMPLES.

I> Matthew 7:1-5

Does it surprise you when I tell you that Jesus exaggerated a lot? He was a master of using hyperbole—for effect. Like when you say: “*If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you 50,000 million times—don’t exaggerate!*” OR “*I’m as hungry as a horse!*” OR “*He’s as strong as an ox.*”

Jesus loved good hyperbole. In His S-O-M, Matthew 7:1-5 –

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. And why worry about a speck in your friend’s [brother’s] eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.”

Wait a minute! He said a *log* in your eye—a log?! It’d be like a person, if you can imagine it, with a telephone pole protruding from his eye trying to get a speck of sand or dust out of his friend’s eye. Probably knock him over in the process.

Doesn’t that strike you as funny? The lesson is obvious: It’s so easy for us to pick at other people’s faults—“*do their inventory*” as they say in AA—but be blind to the glaring faults and defects in our own lives. Before we try to change and fix others, Jesus is telling us to work on ourselves first. Good point!

Can’t you just hear His wry and gentle laughter encouraging us to do the right thing? How the living Word of God loved words. He used them with brilliance and delight—finding just the right way to express what He wanted us to know. It’s inevitable that some of it would draw a chuckle.

II> Matthew 23:24

Then there’s the time Jesus poked a little fun at the legalistic Pharisees who “*strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*”

Talk about an exaggeration! That’s a funny one! Can you imagine someone being so obsessive-compulsive as to try to strain out a tiny little gnat from his soup bowl. . .only to turn around and gorge down a huge humpy camel. Those Pharisees! So zealous about the trivialities while overlooking the weightier matters of spirituality.

We can admire the Pharisees for their attention to detail. But they were forever missing the bigger picture. Of course, **we never do that**. We never focus on the “*externals*” (i.e.: looking good to the outside world) while leaving the deeper issues of “*inner*” heart purity unattended.

Have you ever known someone who was meticulous about everything being done “by the book”, but who could walk all over others in the process? Or someone who was fastidious about their spiritual disciplines, but unavailable to help a needy person or family (even their own). Such a person never seems to make the connection. Great at church. . .not so good at home.

A hard lesson, but a lighthearted way of getting it across.

III> Matthew 19:24

Then there's the one about it being "*easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.*"

Again that's a little lost to us in translation, because the Aramaic word for "camel" also means "large rope". Jesus likely meant that you could more readily get a rope through the eye of a needle than a rich man into the Kingdom of God. It was His way of saying: "You've got a snowball's chance of surviving in ---" if your focus is on material things rather than the things of the spirit.

IV> Matthew 4:19

And doesn't it strike you as a bit humorous that Jesus would tell his disciples (and us) that they would become "*fishers of men*"?

Peter and the others had been out fishing all night and had caught nothing. Jesus, after he has finished teaching a huge crowd of people from the boat, tells Peter to put the nets down for a catch. Peter objects, but finally gives in. They pull in so many fish that the nets begin to break. The joke was on the Disciples. I can't help but think that the people still hanging around on the shore were laughing and pointing at the Disciples: "*He really got you on that one, guys.*"

Meanwhile, the Disciples were astonished. . .scratching their heads. But it drove home the point. I don't know, capturing people in a net? The possibilities amuse me. Can't be too literal, though.

V> Matthew 17:24-27

There's another story that involves fishing (i.e.: the story of the coin in the fish's mouth).

The collector of the temple tax asks Peter if Jesus is a tax-paying citizen. Peter tells him that Jesus always pays His taxes as commanded by the Torah (Exodus 30)—right on time. They go into a house, and Jesus questions Peter about this: "*Aren't kings and their families exempt from paying taxes? Yes! Well, shouldn't that apply to me as well?* [Jesus was emphasizing his kingly role to them.] *But just so we don't offend those who wouldn't understand this, let's pay anyway. But Peter, so you won't forget, you have to go get it.*" And so He has Peter go down to the shore and catch a fish. There, in the fish's mouth, would be a coin to pay the tax.

Gee, I'm a foreigner to this world too—just as Jesus was. But I still have to pay taxes. Just wish it would come to me that way. But given my luck at fishing, it wouldn't do any good. ☺

VI> Matthew 16:18

Doesn't it strike you as funny that Jesus would re-name Peter "the Rock". . .and then vow to build the church on him? [Well, not him, but the profession of faith he had just made in "Christ, the Son of the living God"] I mean Peter:

- Who sank like a rock when he tried to walk on water (Matthew 14:30).
- Who seemed so slow to grasp Jesus' basic teachings. [Jesus would often say to him in exasperation, "Are you still without understanding?" (e.g.: Matthew 15:16)]
- Who was so bold as to ask Jesus what you get for following Him (Matthew 19:27).
- Who boasted that he would stay with Jesus even when all the others had fled (Mt. 26:33)
- Who fell asleep not once but twice when Jesus asked him to be in prayer with Him in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-43).

Peter's character is full of flaws and defects. Peter does not fit the description of one who is a rock. He is more like the sand. Jesus might rather have called him *Sandy* than *Rocky*. ☺ The other Disciples must have wanted to bend over in stitches when Jesus gave Peter this new name.

Yet, you have to admit, a rock is solid. It's stable and reliable. And that you could say about Peter. He evidently had the "potential", the leaning to become a strong leader. And of course, that's what he became.

Isn't it great that Jesus could see people more for *what they could be* than *what they were*? He was looking forward to the day when Peter would become a "pillar" in the early church.

VII> The Empty Tomb

All I am saying about Christian humor was validated at the Empty Tomb. This was God's best joke! Some of the early church fathers thought it was a joke on Satan. The most wonderful and humorous irony in history is the great reversal at the end of the Gospel story (i.e.: death is not the end; life is)! The greatest one-liner ever spoken is "*Christ is risen!*"

A living Jesus justifies all the laughter, comedy, and joy you can engage in. The fact that Jesus is risen is the best reason we all have to laugh.

SO: We can stand to lighten up a little. Christ is risen and that calls for joy—and for laughter.

Humor was a part of Jesus' make-up. And so it should be part of ours. God never intended for our spirits to be always heavy and grave. In fact, He promises in **Isaiah 61:3 (NKJV)** –

*"To bestow upon them a garland of beauty for ashes,
The oil of joy (gladness) for mourning,
And a garment of (festive) praise for a spirit of heaviness (despair)."*

Another promise (made to Job, of all people):

*"He will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy." - **Job 8:21***

APPLICATION

HUMOR IS A GREAT TOOL OF COMMUNICATION. Humor has a remarkable role in reaching the lost for Christ with the message of salvation. **Humor is a way of smuggling truth past people's defenses into their hearts.** So, it is an integral part of effective Christian witness and communication—as the upcoming sermon series and class on faith-sharing will show.

HUMOR IS A GREAT TENSION-REDUCER. In many of Jesus' encounters with the religious establishment, He was obviously upset. He used humor to get a point across, but it also could defuse a tense situation. I can remember this great story of BILLY, my step-son:

It was JULY. Billy realized he had forgotten to get his license plate renewed back in FEB. So, he went to the Secretary of State to renew. The clerk asked for proof of insurance. Wouldn't you know, he'd left it at home. He knew right where it was in his desk. So he had to drag all the way home to get it. On his way back, he got pulled over for—you guessed it—an expired tag. **Billy:** *"I'm on my way to take care of that."* **Officer:** *"Sure you are. Let me see your license / registration / proof of insurance."* **Billy:** *"Now here's the funny part.....You see, I was just on my way to get it." ☺* When officer realized he was not trying to pull one over, he lightened up and issued a warning. Humor saved Billy from getting a ticket that day.

HUMOR ALSO MAKES THE GOING A LITTLE EASIER (in a tough world). Especially the ability to laugh at ourselves AND not take ourselves so seriously—something the Pharisees couldn't do (too bad!).

The devil's toolbox includes GUILT / SHAME / FEAR—things that tear down and sow doubt. Imagine if we had a toolbox that contained HUMOR --something to get us through?

We all need to laugh. Laughter is good medicine. **Proverbs 17:22** says: *"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."*