

Reflections

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A Thousand Miles Away From Joy



One of the topics C.S. Lewis explores in *The Screwtape Letters* is laughter and its sources, including how some sources of laughter can become points of temptation. (In this book, Lewis is writing from the devil's perspective — showing us his temptation playbook.) In one letter, senior devil Screwtape writes to his nephew Wormwood:

... I am specially glad to hear that the two new friends have now made him acquainted with their whole set. All these, as I find from the record office, are thoroughly reliable people; steady, consistent scoffers and worldlings who without any spectacular crimes are progressing quietly and comfortably towards Our Father's house. You speak of their being great laughers. I trust this does not mean that you are under the impression that laughter as such is always in our favour. The point is worth some attention.

I divide the causes of human laughter into Joy, Fun, the Joke Proper, and Flippancy. You will see the first among friends and lovers reunited on the eve of a holiday... Fun is closely related to Joy—a sort of emotional froth arising from the play instinct. It is very little use to us. It can sometimes be used, of course, to divert humans from something else which the Enemy would like them to be feeling or doing: but in itself it has wholly undesirable tendencies; it promotes charity, courage, contentment, and many other evils...



**Cruelty is shameful—
unless the cruel man
can represent it as a
practical joke.**

The real use of Jokes or Humour is in quite a different direction, and it is specially promising among the English who take their 'sense of humour' so seriously that a deficiency in this sense is almost the only deficiency at which they feel shame. Humour is for them the all-consoling and (mark this) the all-excusing, grace of life. Hence it is invaluable as a means of destroying shame. If a man simply lets others pay for him, he is 'mean'; if he boasts of it in a jocular manner and twits his fellows with having been scored off, he is no longer 'mean' but a comical fellow. Mere cowardice is shameful; cowardice boasted of with humorous exaggerations and grotesque gestures can be passed off as funny. Cruelty is shameful—unless the cruel man can represent it as a practical joke. A thousand bawdy, or even blasphemous, jokes do not help towards a man's damnation so much as his discovery that almost anything he wants to do can be done, not only without the disapproval but with the admiration of his fellows, if only it can get itself treated as a Joke. And this temptation can be almost entirely hidden from your patient by that English seriousness about Humour. Any suggestion that there might be too

much of it can be represented to him as 'Puritanical' or as betraying a 'lack of humour'.

But flippancy is the best of all. In the first place it is very economical. Only a clever human can make a real Joke about virtue, or indeed about anything else; any of them can be trained to talk *as if* virtue were funny. Among flippant people the Joke is always assumed to have been made. No one actually makes it; but every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it. If prolonged, the habit of Flippancy builds up around a man the finest armour-plating against the Enemy that I know, and it is quite free from the dangers inherent in the other sources of laughter. It is a thousand miles away from joy: it deadens, instead of sharpening, the intellect; and it excites no affection between those who practise it...¹

Professor Terry Lindvall has written that "[t]he place of humor and laughter in the Christian journey can lead one down the broad path of destruction, or it can lead up to the pleasure of God."² Have you ever prayerfully considered the place of humor and laughter in your life?



*"a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;"*

ECCLESIASTES 3:4 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, pp. 53-56.

² Terry Lindvall, "The Role of Laughter in the Christian Life", *Knowing & Doing*, Spring 2015, <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/the-role-of-laughter-in-the-christian-life/>.

See also Terry Lindvall, *Surprised by Laughter: The Comic World of C.S. Lewis* (Thomas Nelson, 2012).

