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The Role of Laughter in the Christian Life

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In the fourth century, a monk named Evagrius identified key temptations against living the Christian life. He named eight of them, and they became the eight deadly sins. Now we know that Pope Gregory the Great reduced them to seven to fit them in with the symbolic biblical number. But unfortunately the sin that Gregory conflated into sloth was the sin of sadness. Sadness in the face of God's grace and mercy was a denial of faith and hope.

But it isn't the vice that concerns me. It is its corresponding virtue, what Evagrius identified as the blessing of *hilaritas* as essential to Christian living, even if you were an ascetic monk and especially if you are a lawyer or accountant.

The 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. One remembers that the Westminster Catechism defines the chief end of man as being "to glorify God and to *enjoy* Him forever." How many of us have actually enjoyed God today?

Now one recognizes that laughter in the Scriptures is treated with ambiguity. Much of the laughter is mocking. Koheleth, author of the Hebrew book of Ecclesiastes, warns that although there is a time for laughing, there is also a time for weeping. It is better to attend funerals than festivals, advised the prophet of futility. It is better to eat thistles than to eat cake. It is better to be miserable than to be happy. "Sorrow is better than laughing, for sadness has a refining influence on us." Koheleth does not seem to be the best dinner companion for when you are depressed.

In the very first psalm, we are warned not to walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the path of sinners, or sit in the seat of scoffers. However, in the very next psalm, we are told that "He who sits in the heavens laughs; The Lord scoffs at them!" Now, I argue with my wife, are we not to be like God in all things? Can we not imitate His holy mocking? When, she replies, you are as holy as God, you may mock like God.

"Woe to you who laugh now," warned the great Jewish teacher, Jesus, in the Gospel of Luke. Was His admonition targeted against the practice of laughter? No, the context places the judgment against Pharisees who were arrogant and proud. Jesus denounced those who had hardened their hearts now, in the presence of God. He admonished those who asserted their superiority over others and neglected justice and kindness. Woe to them and to the lawyers who compound burdens as well.

As in all comedy, timing is key. Just a few verses earlier in the Beatitudes, a comic reversal takes place, a harbinger of hope for humor. Jesus promises laughter to those who suffer now. "Blessed are you who weep now, for *you shall laugh!*" Laughter in itself is not a vice to be condemned; it is a reward for those who would follow Jesus. The significance of laughter is that it must know its time and place.

Laughter is a reward of humility and utter dependence upon God. It descends like rain upon a parched heart. Condemnation doesn't shower people with a sense of humor but rather those rich, well-fed, and stiff-necked souls who assume superiority over others. So, too, the apostle James later explodes in his warning to hypocritical sinners: "Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom" (4:8–9).

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul warns against foolish talk (*morologia*), best exemplified by the fool who says in his heart “there is no God.” Such talk is damned folly. Paul also warns against a twisting of the good (*eutrepelia*), where virtue and justice are perverted for laughter.

However, in Philippians, Paul commands: “rejoice! and again I say, rejoice!” He calls forth the heart to sing out with gratitude and laughter. The great Roman Catholic journalist G.K. Chesterton, who would infect C.S. Lewis with the sanity of the Christian faith through his delightful paradoxes, explained how this laughter of joy was necessary. “Life is serious all the time,” he quipped, “but living cannot be. You may have all the solemnity you wish in choosing your neckties, but in anything important such as death, sex, and religion, you must have mirth or you will have madness.”

However, there have been those who believed that Christian laughter should be forbidden. Certain Church Fathers did hold dim, frowning views of laughter.

The sixth-century Rule of St. Benedict declared: “As for coarse jests and idle words or words that lead to laughter, these we condemn with a perpetual ban.”

On the other hand, in the “Inferno” of his *Divine Comedy*, Dante buries melancholy people in black mud in hell, because they had remained so stubbornly gloomy in the sweet glad air of God’s Sun. As he leaves the realms of Purgatory and follows Beatrice into Paradise, Dante hears a sound he has never heard before: celestial laughter, the laughter of the heavens.



Doctrinal Laughter

Culling insights from orthodox Christians from St. Augustine and St. Aquinas to Chesterton and Lewis, we can find laughter to be grounded in three major doctrines of the church: Creation, the Fall, and the Incarnation.

In the beginning everything God created was good. And laughter was a gift, created before the fall. When someone like philosopher John Morreal suggests that God could never laugh because He is omniscient and one could never surprise Him with a punch line, he misses the point that we all laugh at jokes we already know. The key is the delightful incongruity which catches us off guard and reminds us of our creation. In the Garden of Eden, God placed two jokes, two grand incongruities that make us laugh even today.

The first incongruity is our own created nature as human beings. We are a mix of dust and divine breath. God breathes into humus, earth, and presto we are that amazing oxymoron—a spiritual animal. Spirit and earth make one comic being. On one side, we are related to the angels, the transcendent, the spiritual, the Amish—on the other side, we are cousins to jackals, weasels, skunks, and lawyers. The heavens and the earth are married, and the union is a marvel, a mystery, a matter for much mirth. “Of all living creatures,” notes Aristotle, “only man is endowed with laughter.”

Angels, wrote C.S. Lewis, do not see anything funny about being angels. Neither do dogs laugh at being dogs. They don’t loiter around the lamppost and fire hydrant and bark about naughty bits. Woodpeckers don’t do knock-knock jokes. Monkeys don’t human around. No chicken laughs when another asks why the human crossed the road.

What is man, O Lord? that Thou should crown him with glory, and bathe him in folly?

When we said that God as His own critic declared everything in creation to be good, we were wrong. There was one condition that God did not pronounce good; there was one joke that was not yet good enough to share. It is not good, He said, that man should be alone. That’s only half of a very good joke; so the second joke of creation is that God split His image in two: that He made man and woman in His own image. The comic possibilities about

and between male and female have yet to be exhausted. Comedy resides in the creation of genders, of two beings so divinely alike and yet so frustratingly different.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis explored the relations between the fallen human condition and humor. Humor, he wrote, involves a sense of proportion and seeing oneself from the outside. The comic muse teaches us to humbly see ourselves as others see us, to have a perspective outside our own myopic view. We will be happier when we see and confess our sins. H. Allen Smith defines a humorist as a “fellow who realizes, first, that he is no better than anybody else, and second, that nobody else is either.”

The reason for the fall is the sin of pride—where everyone takes him- or herself too seriously. Satan, Chesterton reminds us, fell through force of gravity. He took himself too seriously. Pride drags us downward into an easy solemnity about ourselves. Thus we picture hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment. In short, a college faculty meeting. As Garrison Keillor said, “Some people think it’s difficult to be a Christian and to laugh, but I think it’s the other way around. God writes a lot of comedy—it’s just that He has so many bad actors.”

But it is being truly serious about our miserable condition and about the hope of salvation that introduces an unexpected surprise—comedy. And grace arrives for Christians in the Incarnation, and it arrives with a Body. The Incarnation strikes a staggering blow at the Pharisees, the Gnostics, and anyone who denies the value of the physical world or those who try to be more spiritual than God. It is significant that, for Augustine, the Devil and the bad angels are without bodies.

For the Christian, the comic spirit is one of new life, feasting, banqueting, eating, drinking, and playing. This paradise is regained where heaven is described to be like a wedding feast or a sumptuous banquet.

God established Israel herself on a foundation of laughter. In the fresh tradition of C.S. Lewis, Frederick Buechner captured this genesis in all its wild, holy, and hilarious splendor in his *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*:

The place to start is with a woman laughing. She is an old woman, and after a lifetime in the desert, her face is cracked and rutted like a six-month drought. She hunches her shoulders around her eyes and starts to shake. She squinnies her eyes shut, and her laughter is all wheeze and tears running down as she rocks back and forth in her kitchen chair. She is laughing because she is pushing 91 hard and has just been told she is going to have a baby . . . The old woman’s name is Sarah, of course, and her old man’s name is Abraham and they are laughing at the idea of a baby’s being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare’s picking up the tab . . . Maybe the most interesting part of it all is that far from getting angry at them for laughing, God told them that when the baby was born he wanted them to name him Isaac, which in Hebrew means laughter. So you can say that God not only tolerated their laughter, but blessed it and in a sense joined in it himself.

As I have mentioned, I believe that a divine incongruity exists in our nature as spiritual animals. For Lewis, the oldest joke is that we have bodies. It makes us into buffoons; it humbles us when we try to be too dignified or too spiritual.

St. Francis called his body Brother Ass. “Exquisitely Right!” observed Lewis,

because no one in his senses can either revere or hate a donkey. It is a useful, sturdy, obstinate, patient, lovable and infuriating beast; deserving now the stick and now a carrot . . . So the body. There’s no living with it till we recognize that one of its functions in our lives is to play the part of the buffoon.

It ushers us into humility. Humor, humanity, humility, all find similar roots in *humere* and *humus*, in the moisture and earth of our existence.

Kinds of Laughter

Lewis found the sounds of laughter in four overlapping realms. In his eleventh Screwtape letter, he outlined these four kinds of laughter: Joy, Play, the Joke Proper, and Flippancy.

Joy is the laughter of heaven, the secret of the Christian life. Woven out of sorrow and woe, from the crucibles of suffering, absence, and separation, comes the deep, abiding laughter of joy, without tears, promising health, wholeness, and reunion. The desire of joy haunted Lewis, until he found its source in God. Lewis confessed that he didn't go to the Christian faith to be made happy. For a brief time, happiness can be found in worshipping yourself or in a good bottle of port. But only for a brief season. God does not allow any settled happiness or security in this life. He provides inns along the journey, but He wants us to know that we are pilgrims, strangers in a strange land. This is not our home.

Laughter, like music, percolates as thanksgiving and praise. Our enjoyment bubbles up and overflows with gratitude. Our rejoicing should be robust, virile, and spontaneous. In fact, our praise is verbal laughter. Whenever a husband praises his wife or a reader praises a book, that praise completes, consummates, the joy. Wasn't that a good meal, talk, walk, evening? The praise is a blessed reminder of our love and laughter.

The ultimate laughter of joy is in the reunion. In Narnia, whenever the children return, there are hugs and kisses and laughter all around, celebrating reunion. Think of what happens every time you unexpectedly see someone you love at an airport or train station: think of how you laugh for no particular reason other than seeing the other, being reunited. So our great reunion with God Himself, in heaven, conjures up images of a fun and festive wedding feast, a giant banquet. Never an interminable church service or academic lecture, even on laughter.

The second category Lewis defines is **fun**, the laughter of the earth, of our bodies. It is laughter of play in its best sense. As I previously noted, the Westminster Catechism reminds us that our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Enjoy! What a delightful task to be set before us. As Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire* expressed it: "I feel God's pleasure when I run." So when we laugh in enjoying God, we know His pleasure.

Chesterton points to the habit of children to want things again. Whenever you read a child a book, what does he or she say? "Read it again." Whenever you throw a child into the air, and strain your back, what does the child shout? He claps his hands in glee and shouts, "Do it again!"



Because children have such abounding vitality, they want things repeated and unchanged." They are not bored with the same thing. So, too, God exults in monotony. "The sun rises every morning. It might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life.

It is possible that every morning, God claps His hands in glee and says every morning to the sun: "Do it again." And unlike many of us, He jumps up and starts the day.

The laughter of fun has its roots in *humus* and *humere*, in the earth and moisture of our lives, where humor dwells with the lowly, the common, the vulgar, and all the animals in the manger. That cheerful humility opens us up to the humor of our own lives.

Now the fact that man was made from the dust of the earth seems to imply to me that our humor thus will be earthy. The fact that women were created

from a rib, above the waist and nearer the brain, seems to suggest a different kind of laughter. Such a juxtaposition leads to the third cause of laughter Lewis identified as the **Joke Proper**.

As I have mentioned, I believe that a divine incongruity exists in our nature as spiritual animals. The fact that we make coarse jokes, jokes about sex and bodily functions, was for Lewis evidence that we are animals that find our bodies either objectionable or funny.

Laughter, like any other good gift bestowed by God, can be corrupted, bent, spoiled, ruined. Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds. Laughter begins to be a demon the moment it begins to be a god. If we make laughter a god and worship it, it takes its own revenge upon us. It dies. Laughter is not enough to sustain us. It must be recognized as a simple gift; not the gift of life itself.

Lewis warned of the laughter of **Flippancy**. Flippancy jokes about goodness, virtue, justice. It is cruelty disguised as joking. Our throats are like open sepulchers, graves where dead laughter exists. The weed of flippancy grows in the soil of superiority and pride. Its grubby root is in meanness. Over a cup of coffee and a sneering wink and a rolling of the eyes, we mock others. We laugh but know we should be repenting.

Lewis denounced flippancy so thoroughly because it was so close to his heart. It was his thorn. He knew its power, of wink-wink, nudge-nudge, know what I mean smirks toward others, living in what he called his own great puddle of naughtiness and meanness toward others. Yet, just because a good gift can go bad, one should not reject it. Laughter must be enjoyed in its goodness and fullness. In fact, laughter contributes to our physical as well as spiritual health.

The therapeutic benefits of laughter to health have been well documented: When we laugh, chemical endorphins are released into the blood stream; as laughter provides a workout for the diaphragm, they increase the body's ability to use oxygen. Laughter enhances blood flow, reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, stimulates alertness, dulls stabs of pain, fosters a sense of relaxation, provides cardiovascular benefits such as aerobic exercise, and loosens your bowels. Laughter truly may be good medicine.

Lessons of Laughter

As the proverb tells us, a happy heart makes the face cheerful. So what might one do to enhance one's laughter? C.S. Lewis and other writers offer some hints.

First, habits of humor require an encounter with the God of laughter. Seek Him and seek to enjoy Him and His people.

Second, spend time with laughing saints. St. Teresa of Avila prayed that God would deliver her from gloomy saints. The father of Methodism, John Wesley, preached that a "sour religion is the devil's religion," inspired no doubt from Jesus' admonition for men not to look dour when they fasted. Be with saints who see God's grace interrupting their lives, who take time to give thanks for a meal, a conversation with a friend, a kiss from a spouse.

Third, read and listen to historical saints who display the gladness of God in what they write and say. And when you read the Scriptures, don't imitate the voice of a shouting televangelist but use a wry Jewish accent. It will vivify the Word with chutzpah and joy.

Fourth, do not take yourself so seriously. Remember that the opposite of serious is not comic, but trivial; and the opposite of comic is tragic. Thus one can be comic and serious at the same time. With this, retell your own story as a comedy. Some of the best tales come from a tragic beginning, or middle, or even what seems to be the end as in a romantic relationship. Refashion your biography with God as the Director staging a divine comedy not a pathetic tragedy. What this does is put us into a fresh perspective. It allows us to see ourselves from the outside and God on the inside. Even though some of us may be faltering and stumbling through the valley of tears, we can still see the Celestial City up ahead.

The light of God's gift of laughter can lighten our load on this pilgrimage. It will bless the company of pilgrims and infect others who want to join the joyous throng. Like the gospel, laughter is contagious and can draw people not only to God but to each other. And that, Evagrius would tell us, is a forgotten virtue that we should practice. ■■

We feed children in order that they may soon be able to feed themselves; we teach them in order that they may soon not need our teaching.

C.S. Lewis

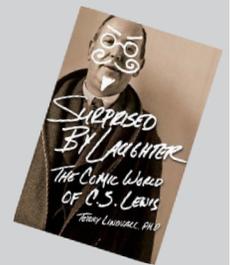


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RECOMMENDED READING

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

For C.S. Lewis merriment was serious business, and like no book before it, *Surprised by Laughter* explains why. Author Terry Lindvall takes readers on a highly amusing and deeply meaningful journey through the life and letters of one of the most beloved Christian thinkers and writers. As Lindvall shows, the unique magic of Lewis's approach was his belief that explosive and infectious joy dwells deep in the heart of Christian faith. Readers can never fully understand Lewis, his life or his legacy until they learn to laugh with him.



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