THE HEALING POWER OF HUMOR
Lars Wilhelmsson

It is a test of a good religion whether you can make a joke about it.”¹
–G. K. Chesterton

“The devil laughs because God’s world seems senseless; the angel
laughs with joy because everything in God’s world has meaning.”²
–Milan Kundera

“If you’re not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don’t want to go there.”³
–Martin Luther

"Make a man laugh and you open heaven to him.”⁴
--Rabbinical Proverb

“Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.”⁵
–Karl Barth

“Laughter is the closest thing between two people.”⁶
–Victor Borge

“Everybody laughs in the same language.”⁷
–Anonymous

"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up
the bones" (Proverbs 17:12).
–Solomon

I found out the reason I was invited to speak this morning is because someone else
suddenly cannot be here. It reminds me of the pastor who was invited to speak at a mental
institution by a member of his church. It was the practice of this institution that employees were
to ask ministers, priests or rabbis they knew to speak at the institution. After waiting as long as
he could, one of the employees finally asked his pastor to speak.

After he had preached for a while, a fellow stood up and shouted, "Sir, that's the worst
sermon I have ever heard!" The preacher looks over at his friend who invited him and asked
what he should do? His friend motioned for him to continue to preach. So he did. But after
another five minutes the same fellow stood up and shouted even louder, "I said, that's the worst
sermon I have ever heard!" By this time the preacher was pretty unnerved and flustered. Again
he looks over to his friend and asks, "What shall I do?" His friend says, "Keep on preaching,
brother, this man has been here eight years and this is the first time I've heard him say anything
that makes sense."
Some of us are grateful to preach no matter what the reason may be!

My preaching here this morning also reminds me of the henpecked husband who could never please his wife. No matter what he did she picked on him. With his luck she lived to be pretty old. But finally she died. When he went to the mortuary he was met by the mortician who asked him, "Do you want your wife cremated or buried?" Quick as a wink, he responded, "Let's do both. Let's not take any chances."

I'm glad you're willing to take chances by having me preach this morning.

Did you hear about the young preacher who had been out of seminary for about a year and asked his newly-wed wife, "How many really great preachers do you think there are in the world?" His wife responded, "I don't know. But one thing I do know. There is one less than you think!"

The other Sunday after the service a deacon came up to me and said to me, "I really appreciate you, pastor, you are such a warm pastor. I was gratified to hear this until I turned to the dictionary which defined warm as, "Not so hot."

A bishop in England said of several of his preachers that they would make "great martyrs." "They're so dry," he said, "that they would burn quickly." This same bishop said of another preacher that he was "supernaturally boring." He said, "No man could be that boring without God's help."

I trust this morning that I won't be supernaturally boring.

With wars and rumors of wars over half the world, suffering and hardship for countless thousands and a general sense of insecurity pervading our society, many feel we have every reason for doom and gloom. With the world falling apart, many will reason, the preacher spends his time preaching about such trifles as humor.

As a teenager in our high school youth group in church I remember when a veteran missionary statesman came to speak. He was speaking on the subject, "What Qualities Are Most Important In Being a Missionary?" I was caught by complete surprise when this godly missionary began his message with the statement,

"The three most important qualities in being a missionary are: number one: a good sense of humor, number two: a good sense of humor, and number three: a good sense of humor."

As a teenager I thought that was not the greatest spiritual insight displayed by a godly Christian. But the longer I have been in the ministry, the more convinced I have become that that advice given to that youth group was sent by God.
Few qualities are more important in Christian ministry than a good sense of humor.

PURITAN FOREFATHERS

For too many believers, religion is no laughing matter. Our Puritan forefathers agreed with such reasoning. They were more than suspicious of humor. Life for them just was not fully. The great preachers of that time not only did not use jokes, but actually preached and wrote against it. Jesus’ warning that every idle word that people shall speak, they shall give account of in the Day of Judgment (Mt 12:36); Paul’s ban on “foolish talk” or “course joking, which are out of place” (Eph 5:4); these and other texts were considered sufficient to indict humor as a sin worthy of repentance.

The great saints of different theological stripes, Augustus Toplady, the Calvinist, and John Wesley, the Arminian, shared a common dislike for the lighter side of life. Both felt that even children, as a rule, should not waste their time with play. Cruden, whose scholarly labors produced a very valuable concordance said of humor that to laugh is to be merry in a sinful manner.

That was in 1769, but many people of our day take the same view. To be good means to be solemn. To be religious means to repress joy. Misery becomes the thermometer of holiness. The decision for any action becomes easy. If it is pleasant, it is wrong, and if it is fun, it must be wicked. God is seen as a cosmic Policeman who demands that people do those things they do not want to do and punishes anyone who is having fun. Thus religion becomes associated with a life of repression, negation and gloom. Religion thus becomes a weight instead of wings.

For many of us our attitude is reflected by the mother who warned her son, “Freddie, you must not laugh out loud in church.” “But, mom,” Freddie explained, “I didn't mean to. I was just smiling and the smile busted.”

To have started out a message with a barrage of humor, as I just did, would have been reprehensible during earlier times. But is it?

WHAT IS HUMOR?

Humor is very difficult to define. The root of the English word “humor” is the Latin “umor,” meaning “liquid, fluid.” Humor is something that flows within us and courses through us with the ability to see what is incongruous in life—the juxtaposition of the expected and the surprising, the sublime and the ridiculous. It is our sense of humor which makes us notice the irregular and bizarre in human nature and human behavior. It is shrewd observation on the behavior of eccentrics. Through humor we understand, appreciate, and even embrace puzzling, curious and mismatched events and occurrences that take place in our daily lives.
In the Bible (especially in the book of Proverbs) those people who depart from the norm and engage in excesses are made to appear ridiculous. The device of the author seems to be to shame or laugh such people back to reality and reform. The author makes vice or excess look ridiculous and therefore not respectable in society. Through the use of sarcastic humor people are exhorted to follow the norms of righteous and disciplined living.

Irwin Cobb wrote that humor is simply "tragedy standing on its head with its trousers split open." Steve Allen theorizes that it may be the human brain's involuntary reaction to the simultaneous reception of contradictory but accurate information. Both definitions point to the fact that we laugh to survive and to defend ourselves against the unacceptable and thus save ourselves from going crazy or becoming fanatical.

To ask the question, "Why do we laugh?" is a little like asking, "Why do we breathe?" or "Why do we eat?" Not that laughter is as physically vital to our lives as oxygen and nutrients, but laughing is a part of our basic human nature. Laughter and a sense of humor are integral and significant parts of what it means to be a human being. According to The World Book Encyclopedia:

"No one knows exactly why we laugh, or why anything that is funny should cause us to make such a peculiar noise. It would be just as logical to stick our thumbs in our ears and wiggle our fingers as it is to giggle, bellow or howl with laughter. But when something strikes our funny bone, our diaphragm flutters up and down, and we are moved to give out laughter.

This urge to laugh appears early in life. Babies smile, then coo, and finally chuckle when pleased. If certain parts of the body are tickled with the fingers, laughter is produced in babies as well as in many adults. By the time a child starts school, he also laughs at things he hears and sees. He does not need to have his ribs tickled in order to giggle."8

Herbert Spencer, in his book, Physiology of Laughter, argued that a sense of the incongruous (inappropriate, inconsistent, absurd) caused by certain unexpected contrasts will be followed by an involuntary contraction of certain facial muscles.9

Theologian Paul Jewett shares that when he attended a concert, as the maiden sang her beautiful swan song, she paused before the last notes and in that sad, sweet, silent moment, the trumpeter in the pit dropped his instrument. Jewett shares that when that happened, everyone broke out in snickers and laughter.

We laugh at the sight of a fool upon the throne of the king; or the proud man suffering from indignity; or the child introducing his irrelevancies into the conversation of the mature. We laugh at the juxtaposition of things which do not fit together. A boy slipping on the ice is not funny. Slipping on the ice is funny only if it happens to one whose dignity is upset.
Someone has said that laughter is "a sane and healthy response to the innocent foibles of people, and to some which are not so innocent."

It is obvious that God has a great sense of humor. Just look at His creation such as His design of the camel, the penguin, the monkey, and middle-aged men.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament Psalm 100 tells us to "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful songs" (Ps 100:1-2).

Humor is certainly associated with joy and gladness. The Bible states:

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh" (Ecc 3:1-4).

Several passages in Scripture speak of God giving or causing laughter in human life. Sarah's laugh of unbelief when God told her that she would bear a son in her old age (90 years) was replaced with her laughter of ecstasy following the birth of her promised son, Isaac (whose name means "Laughter"), and she shouts, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me" (Gn 21:6).

Bildad, the Shuhite, comforted Job with these words:

"Surely God does not reject a blameless man or strengthen the hands of evildoers. He will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy"
(Job 8:20-21)

In one of the Songs of Ascent in the book of Psalms which was used in the worship of the Old Testament, the people sang:

"When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. . ." (Ps 126:1-2).

Solomon gives us five "character" types in the book of Proverbs to show the inappropriateness and even the humor of such persons. They are "the fool" (Pr 26:3-4,7,9; 27:22), "the sluggard" (6:9-11; 22:13; 26:13-16), "the businessman" (20:14), "the braggart" (12:9; 25:14), and "the nagging wife" (11:22; 19:13; 21:9,19; 25:24; 27:15-16).

THE FOOL

• "A whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools!"
(Pr 26:3)
• "Do not answer a **fool** according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes" (v. 4).

• "Like a lame man's legs that hang limp is a proverb in the mouth of a **fool**" (v. 7).

• "Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand is a proverb in the mouth of a **fool**" (v. 9).

• "Though you grind a **fool** in a mortar, grinding him like grain with a pestle, you will not remove his folly from him" (27:22).

**THE SLUGGARD**

• "Go the ant, you **sluggard**; consider its ways and be wise!" (6:6).

• "How long will you lie there, you **sluggard**? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest--and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man" (vv. 9-11).

• "The **sluggard** says, 'There is a lion outside!' or, 'I will be murdered in the streets!'" (22:13)

• "The **sluggard** says, "There is a lion in the road, a fierce lion roaming the streets!' As a door turns on its hinges, so a **sluggard** turns on his bed. The **sluggard** buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth. The **sluggard** is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly" (26:13-16).

**THE BUSINESSMAN**

• "'It's no good, it's no good!' says the **buyer**, then off he goes and boasts of his purchase" (20:14).

**THE BRAGGART**

• "Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than **pretend to be somebody** and have no food" (12:9).

• "Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give." (25:14)
THE NAGGING WIFE

- "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion." (11:22)
- "A foolish son is his father's ruin, and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping" (19:13).
- "Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife." (21:9)
- "Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife" (v. 19).
- "Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife." (25:24)

THE NEW TESTAMENT

In one of our Lord's beatitudes as recorded by Luke, Jesus promised,

"Blessed [happy] are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Lk 6:21).

Laughter and humor then are associated with joy in Scripture. And joy is a part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22).

I believe the overly serious person not only err but sin in failing to realize how many situations there are in life when it is "time to laugh," time to experience fun and joy.

Peter

On the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples were accused of being drunk, Peter illustrates what it means to have a sense of humor. If we had been in his place we might drawn our moral skirts about us and defended our Christian respectability: drunkenness is a sin; the Old Testament condemns drunkenness; we obey God's Word. Therefore you insult us by calling us drunkards. We live the separated life. We drink nothing stronger than coffee or coke.

Instead of such a self-righteous, defensive posture, Peter answered, "Look, it's too early in the day to be drunk. Now we have something of supreme importance to tell you."

Maybe they laughed. At least Peter gave a light reply to a serious charge. And the lightness allowed him to get on with his redemptive business. Instead of getting caught in a ponderous, heavy debate about his own impeccable moral credentials, he pointed them to the risen Christ. And so must we.
Jesus

Divine humor is readily apparent in the teachings of Jesus. The Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood wrote a book entitled, The Humor of Christ, in which he points out that we have a "phenomenal" ability to miss this aspect of Jesus' life.

It was the incongruous—the inconsistency and stupidity of man—that Jesus employed in hitting home His points.

This was seen in Jesus' story of the man who lights a lamp and then puts it under a bed.

To the self-righteous leaders of His day, Jesus said:

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Mt 7:3-5).

Do you think these judgmental religious leaders ever forgot that picture? Jesus used humor to drive home a very serious lesson.

On another occasion Jesus said to the religious leaders:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (23:23-24).

Mark Twain described a camel as "an ostrich with an extra set of legs." Can't you picture these dignified religious leaders carefully straining out a gnat that is virtually impossible to locate with the human eye and at the same time swallowing a large, awkward animal?

How many of us have ever pictured the process? Shut your eyes and imagine the camel going down! Picture the series of sensations, as the long hairy neck slid down the throat of the Pharisees—all that loose-hung anatomy—the hump, two humps—both of them slid down, and they never noticed—and the legs—all of them—with the whole outfit of knees and big-padded feet.
We would never dare minimize the serious side of our Lord and Savior, for He is forever "the Man of Sorrows" acquainted with grief. That side has been impressed upon us by nearly all who have written about Christ and by nearly all who have attempted to draw or paint pictures of Him.

But let us not forget the other side, mirrored for us in the gospels. Gloom is not the hallmark of Jesus' personality. He even got the name of being a frequent guest at parties. He was accused of being "a glutton" and "a drunkard." Why? Because He knew how to enjoy life! He knew what it was to associate with mankind in their joys as well as sorrows.

Do you think a person without humor would be popular at parties? Do you think a person who didn't know how to smile and laugh would draw children to Him? Do you think it would have been said of Jesus that "the common people heard Him gladly" if He was always serious?

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus did not measure spirituality by the length of the face. It was Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who said that he probably would have become a preacher if it weren't for the fact that so many preachers looked like undertakers.

Godly People

Godly people throughout the centuries have recognized the important place that humor should have in our lives. Because Abraham Lincoln had gained such a reputation for liking humor two ladies who belonged to the Quakers engaged in a discussion of which side would win the War between the States. Said one, "I think Mr. Jefferson Davis' side will win." "Why," asked the other, "Does thee think so?" "Because," said the first, "Mr. Davis is a praying man." "But," said the second, "Mr. Lincoln also prays." "I know he does," said the first. "But the Lord will think Mr. Lincoln is joking."

A lady was upset with the prince of preachers, C. H. Spurgeon, for using too much humor in his sermons. Mr. Spurgeon replied to her, "Lady, if you only knew how much I held back, you wouldn't complain." It was Spurgeon who also stated: "A church is in a bad way when it vanishes laughter from the sanctuary and leave it to the cabaret, the night club, and the toastmasters."

Most of us know of the great effort David Livingstone made in opening up Africa for missions. Few, however, know that in the midst of their lonely life, he and his devoted wife often acted like school kids on a trip. Laughter 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 old. It is not becoming. We must be more staid." Stated like a true Englishman!

The evangelist D. L. Moody was known for his humor as he loved to play jokes on people. He felt relaxed with young and old alike, and would often toss back his head, and laugh so hard that he would have to wipe away tears of joy. An associate said, "I have seen him roll on
his couch with laughter." He liked to gather his associates around him at the close of the day and 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 counseling room. He replied, "If I didn't, I'd have a nervous breakdown at the pace at which I live."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that

"... only God is ultimately to be taken seriously. Everything human remains less serious by comparison."\(^\text{10}\)

Humor exposes everything which claims to have ultimate significance. And this is especially true in regard to ourselves. William Lynch perceptively has pointed out, "The one offense, therefore, which comedy cannot endure is that a man should forget he is a man."\(^\text{11}\) Laughter reminds us our own finitude. It saves us from pretentiousness.

Reinhold Niebuhr considers this ability to find amusement about ourselves a capacity for "self-transcendence":

"People with a sense of humor do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to 'stand off' from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. . . . This pretension is ludicrous; and its absurdity increases with our lack of awareness of it. The less we are able to laugh at ourselves, the more it becomes necessary and inevitable that others laugh at us."\(^\text{12}\)

A young minister once asked his wife, "How many really great preachers do you think there are in this world, dear." She answered, "I don't know. But I'm sure there is one less than you think."

Few, if any theologian, will eclipse Karl Barth in terms of impact on the theological climate in this twentieth century. No person of our time has written so extensively and comprehensively in the field of theology. His massive 12 volume *Church Dogmatics* is a library in and of itself. He says of His writings:

"The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about God in a book of *Dogmatics*. They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each is thicker than the previous one. As they laugh, they say to one another, 'Look! Here he comes now with his little pushcart full of volumes of the *Dogmatics*!' And they laugh about the men who write so much about Karl Barth instead of writing about the things he is trying to write about. Truly, the angels laugh."\(^\text{13}\)
A marvelous sense of proportion and perspective! All our efforts, at best, are nothing compared with divine realities.

SURROUNDED BY THE COMICAL

Our Maker has not only endowed us with the capacity for laughter, but He has placed us in an environment which has a touch of the comical. Some animals not only look funny, but they act that way too. A good example is the monkey.

Some other examples of the incongruous:

- Oral Roberts University building an infirmary.
- Kenneth Hagin, Jr. having to wear glasses.
- Hollywood filming a movie called, "The Ten Commandments."
- An Italian Communist producing one of the most biblical modern films on the life of Christ, "The Gospel According to Saint Matthew."
- When television came along, permitting Christians to catch up on the movies they had missed during the previous thirty years.

JOY AND SORROW

Joy is not necessarily the opposite of sorrow. Sorrow and joy can be held together at the same time. Of Jesus it was written: "... who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross" (Heb 12:2). Again and again in our own experience, laughter and tears are close relatives in our family of feelings. Could it be that humor is an indication that there is joy in the heart of the universe. The opposite of joy is not sorrow; it is unbelief.

The New Testament, which is the most sorrowful book in the world, begins with the laughter of angels around the cradle of a Child, and ends with the Hallelujah Chorus sung by all the ransomed host of heaven. Hardly joyless!

HEALING AGENT

“He who laughs, lasts.”

–Robert Fulgham

Laughter is known to relieve tension, soothe the pain of disappointment and strengthen the spirit for difficult tasks.
In a world filled with tragedy and stress humor is essential for survival. St. Theresa of Avila always looked for novices who knew how to laugh, eat and sleep. She was sure that if they ate heartily they were healthy, if they slept well they were more than likely free of serious sin, and if they laughed, they had the necessary disposition to survive a difficult life.

Brushing aside questions about good diets and sleeping habits, two women, aged 97 and 102, told a Senate hearing that their prescription for longevity might be lots of interests, plenty of laughs and a strong faith in God.

Not only is it not irreverent to find laughter in our situation, but it is healthy and needful. Humor is one of the best solvents in the world for the grit of irritation that gets into the cogs of life these days, and the person who can laugh at himself as well as at others and his circumstances, will be among the last casualties in the war of nerves.

If this is true, and I am convinced that it is, humor becomes a very important and essential ingredient in life. Jokes, in fact, are no laughing matter to the brain. They are a type of release valve that enables us to think the unthinkable, and accept the unacceptable. Humor helps us to discover new relationships, adjust better to life with its numerous changes, and it helps us to maintain our mental health. Without jokes we probably would be a dull, dimwitted society, trapped in a harsh world too serious to bear.

Someone has quipped, "He who laughs—lasts." Jewish and Black humor are examples of groups that have drawn on humor during some of the darkest times in modern Western history. It is no accident that Jewish and Black comedians represent the highest percentage of people in that vocation, in proportion to their numbers in the general population.

Victor Frankl spoke of his suffering in a Nazi concentration camp:

"Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything in the human makeup, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds."15

During World War II, when their country was being bombed nightly, the normally staid British people reportedly experienced an eruption of joking. This humor surely let off tension and undoubtedly built rapport that helped individuals and families cope with their terrifying circumstances.
According to studies, the average number of laughs a person has in a day is 17. It is probably not enough to stay healthy, because so many people are sick and since there is a direct correlation between laughter and good health.

Several years ago (1964), a respected journalist named Norman Cousins found he had a serious illness with very little hope for recovery. His illness was diagnosed as a kind of arthritic degenerative disease. The prognosis was paralysis for the rest of his life at best and possibly death.

His condition didn't improve in the hospital. In fact, the longer he was there and the more medication he took, the worse he got. He finally asked his doctor, who was also a good friend, if he could experiment with some rather unorthodox therapy. His doctor friend reluctantly agreed.

Mr. Cousins asked to leave the hospital and check into a hotel room across the street. He asked them to stop all drugs and to give him massive doses of vitamin C. And his final request was that he be allowed to view comedy films. Since Allen Funt was a good friend of his, he was supplied with countless hours of old video tapes of "Candid Camera" to look at. Another friend also supplied him with a large collection of humorous books. Whenever Cousins felt pain, he watched a film or listened while a nurse read from one of his books.

Immediately and dramatically Cousins felt better. He testified that he "made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an aesthetic effect" that could give at least two hours of pain-free sleep.

While some argued that it was a placebo and that Cousins would have gotten well anyway, others were convinced that laughter, his happy attitude, had a great deal to do with his recovery.

A few years later Norman Cousins had a serious heart attack. His recovery from this illness once again gave him an opportunity to show that humor heals, that laughter contributes to physical health.

Mr. Cousins testifies that laughter was able to do for his body what drugs could not do. Laughter relaxed him so that he could get some sleep at night. Laughter changed his attitude so that he was more optimistic about the future. Thus laughter seemed to encourage his body's own recuperative powers.

This doesn't mean that humor and laughter is the "cure-all" for all disease. Our bodies are much more complex than that. But it does mean that our attitudes significantly affect our physical, as well as, our mental health.
Cousin's experiment bears out the theory formulated many years ago by Rabelais, a French physician, who taught that laughter can heal grievous pain. Dr. Rabelais observed that a bad stomach could be purged with laughter.

While it has been said for a long time that a person with a good sense of humor has better healing qualities or properties, in recent years this has been tested scientifically over and over again. Now there is hard evidence that laughter increases circulation, respiration and the endorphin level in the blood. Endorphin is a body-produced chemical given credit for controlling pain.

William Fry, a Stamford Medical School psychiatrist who has been studying the physiological effects of laughter for more than 30 years has stated:

"Laughter is good for the whole body, and you don't even need humor to benefit from a good belly laugh. The laughter process stimulates internal organs, helps reduce blood pressure, promotes relaxation and also reduces certain immune suppressors in the blood.

It's about time that humor not be considered a trivial and inconsequential part of our lives, but in fact vital in terms of health and interaction."16

It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that just as stress and negative feelings impair one's immune system, positive emotions such as good humor could actually boost one's immune functions.

Physicians are therefore taking laughter seriously. Humor is no laughing matter! As Art Buchwald pointed out, "We may soon have a new medical specialty called "Humorpedics." The conversation between doctors may sound like this. "Intern, what's wrong with the patient?" "He's lost his sense of humor. We're hoping to get a transplant from a comedian."

MENTAL HEALTH

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American poet, who said:

"Mirth is the medicine from God."17

Gordon Allport, who taught psychology for many years at Harvard University, observed that laughter can be an important therapy:

"The neurotic who learns to laugh at himself may be on the way to self-management, perhaps to cure."18
The Reduction of Anxiety

Two psychiatrists, formerly at the Yale School of Medicine, developed a "Mirth-Response Test" to assess the role of humor in personality. They found that responses to humor were good clues for determining emotional health. In their test group they found that humor led to anxiety, anger and feelings of abhorrence in maladjusted individuals, whereas it reduced anxiety and resulted in relaxation in healthy personalities. Their study confirmed Freud's belief that the basic element in all humor is the reduction of anxiety.

Christopher Fry stated,

“... comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith.”

When people are depressed, nervous or upset, their sense of humor, therefore, deteriorates. We can tell something about a person's mental health from how much his sense of humor comes into play.

I think most of us, especially in the household of faith, don't laugh enough, especially at ourselves. We live life deadpan. We hit every problem head-on, without the light release of laughter.

Humor is like a shock absorber that enables us to ride through the deep ruts and hard bumps of life. It is a healing agent that brings physical, emotional and spiritual health. Jokes are no laughing matter to the brain.

Laughter is God's soothing touch on a tense and stressful world. Abraham Lincoln is a good example of a person who learned to see himself and his difficult situations in proper perspective. Therefore he was able to carry the heavy burdens placed upon him as the leader of this nation in an extremely difficult time.

Laughter is medicine. The Bible testifies to that. Solomon states:

"A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit. . . . A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones. . . . A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones"

(Pr 15:15,30)

Laughter is the miracle drug with no bad side effects. There is a real lot of medicine in fun.
A happy mind is a healthy mind, for laughter relieves the mind from intense concentration and sets up a natural rhythm. As an archer who, coming out of battle, unstrings his taut bow so that it will not lose its vibrancy when he needs it again, so a sense of humor fits us to meet the battles more resourcefully and energetically.

**Exposes Idolatry (Sacred Cows)**

Humor exposes the idolatry of all kinds of sacred cows that people worship. In the religious world where people are continually tempted in their solemn assemblies to reverence themselves and to speak and behave pompously, humor quickly and sharply exposes the hypocrisy and self-righteousness. In the world of politics humor is a good defense against abuses of power and an effective deflator of swollen egos.

People often will accept humor (it’s too awkward sometimes not to) as a critique when they will not accept other forms of criticism and ridicule for the outlandish, wild, nonsensical, illogical, ridiculous things that go on today. Humor sometimes cuts through superstitions, out-worn creeds, out-dated traditions, silly habits that have come to be accepted by our culture and society. Humor and laughter have often been used by humorists such as Mark Twain to lay bare the stupidity and injustice of government, clubs, societies, churches and individuals.

During the French Revolution, when death was piled upon death under the horrible regime of Robespierre, the crowd which seemed hypnotized by cruelty continually bowed to his demands again and again. But, one day, someone in the gallery burst out laughing. From row to row, the laughter spread until the gallery was almost hysterical. This incident marked the beginning of the end of the ruthless reign of Robespierre. A harmless laugh broke the spell of one of the worst terrors the world has ever known.

If Hitler would have been held up to ridicule the German people may have awakened to what was really going on. For laughter is as infectious as gloom.

Humor is needed to correct the abuses of authority that encroach on our freedoms. There are times when politicians, judges and other authorities who are supposed to uphold justice and foster truth, need to be laughed right out of their positions of authority.

**Reduces Problems to their Proper Proportion**

Humor also is important because it reduces problems to their proper proportion. Humor helps to get rid of conflicts that really do not matter; it disposes of irrelevancies by laughing at them. It enables us to get a fresh perspective on a knotty problem, a perspective which helps shift the situation into manageable proportions.
Reduces People to their Proper Place

One of my favorite devotional writers, Oswald Chambers, comments that we should be sure that the first person we refuse to take seriously is ourselves. As someone aptly put it:

“Those who can't laugh at themselves leave the job to others.”

--Anonymous

This is medicine of which we all need to constantly be reminded. For we seem to have a propensity for ostentation and pretension. We are continually tempted to think that God, other people, our business, possibly couldn't get along without us.

A Scotchman who was leaving his native land for a tour of America said to the crowd that came to see him off: "God be with you 'til I get back." When we take ourselves too seriously we play God. When the ego gets blown out of proportion, it is good for somebody to prick it with a pin—a barb of humor—once in a while. Laughing at ourselves makes us realize that we are the creature and not the Creator.

Humor is important because it saves us from ourselves—from taking ourselves too seriously. Humor has a way of reducing people to their proper proportion. Without a healthy sense of humor we take ourselves too seriously. And this, of course, is a form of pride. We think that who we are, and what we do, is so utterly important.

The self-righteous person has no appreciation of humor directed at himself. He, and what he does, is too important to poke fun at. Such a person is zealously striving toward virtue by a careful program of moral gymnastics. And such a person is dreadfully anxious about his prestige and reputation.

Some of the self-righteous people are smart enough to know that one of the best ways to make his way up the ladder of success is to tell stories and be funny. Thus he uses humor to win friends, impress "important" people. Yet all the while he is carefully analyzing the responses of the people he is trying to impress to see what points his humor scores in his gamesmanship.

Thus humor is not a genuine enjoyment but a game plan to win a certain reaction. This is pure manipulation. And such a person can laugh at everything but himself. If he is the victim of another's joke, he is likely to see nothing very funny at all.

For 1982 Warren Wiersbe was selected to be Eutychus X, an anonymous writer who would write "tongue in cheek" articles for the magazine, Christianity Today. Each year the magazine has a different person who writes as Eutychus. When asked what he had learned as a writer of satire the past year, Wiersbe responded that too many Christians and Christian organizations find it difficult to laugh at themselves and thus take themselves too seriously.
Wiersbe then goes on and thanks the "eight" people who wrote him complimentary letters and even countless others who sent him hate mail. And what a "collection" I have he remarked.

Ethel Barrymore rightly points out that we grow up when we get your first laugh at ourselves. No person is healthy mentally unless he has learned to laugh at self. When we are able to laugh at ourselves we see ourselves objectively and without prejudice. Humor, like true religion, leads one to a sense of proportion. It enables us to look at ourselves without illusions. **It reveals the gap between pretensions and actuality.** That is why we laugh when a pompous person gets his hat knocked off by a snowball.

Humor, like religion, then, gives a sense of perspective. While religion provides a proper perspective about God and His greatness and majesty, humor gives perspective about ourselves and about others. Humor, like religion, has a way of cutting a pompous strutter down to size. Thus both religion and humor are rooted in humility.

Artemus Ward was Lincoln's favorite author. Mr. Ward was a newspaper man who wrote humorous prose and one of his favorite targets was Mr. Lincoln. He used to viciously use satire in describing Mr. Lincoln. Lincoln loved it and read every word Mr. Ward dished out.

Edward Stanton, the Secretary of War, tells us that on September 22, 1862, just at the depths of despair during the Civil War, Stanton and other members of the cabinet were called into Lincoln's office. When they went in they saw the President sitting reading a little book and chuckling to himself. Then he said, "Gentlemen, have you ever read any of Artemus Ward?" He proceeded to read a chapter from that book, a spoof on preachers, another favorite target of Artemus Ward. Stanton said that when the President finished reading the chapter he put it down and laughed hysterically, but everyone else in the office was silent. Those were serious times, and Stanton said they assumed they were called in there for serious matters. He said he was so upset he considered walking out. Then Lincoln put the book down, sighed deeply, and said that with the strain that is upon him night and day, if he did not laugh, he would die. Then He said that the other soldiers needed this medicine as much as he.

C. S. Lewis claimed that laughter at one's self is functionally the closest thing to the act of repentance. It implies that we are not taking ourselves too seriously and have really come to terms with the "not-yet-completed" state of our human condition. We thus are honest and courageous enough to hold up our excessive pretensions to honest light and not become defensive about our painful shortcomings.

A person with a healthy sense of humor is even able to laugh at his own unfortunate circumstances. I can think of no better example than the late John Gates, who was a professor of philosophy for over forty years. Though he was in constant pain as a parapalegic as he was unable to walk and even had difficulty talking clearly, he did not feel sorry for himself, nor would he allow anyone else to feel sorry for him.
For one Christmas his students bought him roller skates. And how he loved it! Though he himself could hardly throw a snow ball, he was continually picking snowball fights with us. He loved having his students push him as hard as they could to see how far and how fast he could go in his wheelchair. His wife confessed that at times she couldn't stand seeing the crazy things he and his students did because of the danger of accidents.

Pain at times was excruciating for Dr. Gates, but, oh, how his sense of humor kept him from self-pity and despair. What a healing tonic it was not only for him, but for his gracious wife, Grace (who, by the way, is not without a healthy dose of humor herself) and for all of us. John's humor was contagious! It spread like wildfire in the school. Thank God for people with a heavy dose of humor!

When we are tempted to feel sorry for ourselves it is helpful to see the humorous aspects even of our difficult circumstances. When we experience what our world considers "success" we can easily get carried away and forget from where we have come and who we really are--weak and rebellious sinners, objects of God's mercy and grace. Humor cuts through all our pretenses and facades and keeps us real.

One of the most remarkable examples of humor is that of the godly Thomas Moore. He even brought a sustaining sense of humor with him right up to the steps of the scaffold as he was faced with imminent death, as he was about to be beheaded. He accepted help climbing up, but cracked that "as for coming down, I will fend for myself." He then asked the headsman to let the axe spare his beard since it, at least, had not offended King Henry.

Humor then, saves us from pomposity. And the wonderful thing about finding humor about people, especially ourselves, is that he who laughs at himself never runs out of things to laugh at.

Humor then, is a real tonic for the soul. While our souls need great, solemn, enriching truths about God which come to us from the Bible, they also need the lighter touches of life which give perspective to our lives and help us see it whole, and which saves from taking anything, least of all ourselves, too seriously.

LIMITATIONS OF HUMOR

“There is nothing in which people ore betray their character than in what they laugh at.”

--Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

“Much may be known of a man’s character by what excites his laughter.”

--Goethe

A person’s sense of humor is tested by what he laughs at and his sense of values by what he doesn’t laugh at.
Like everything else in life, humor is a double-edged sword in that it has its limitations. After all, not all incongruities are funny and entertaining. Some are very tragic and laughter or joke telling is totally inappropriate and highly insensitive.

Reinhold Niebuhr warned:

“To laugh at life in the ultimate sense is to scorn it.”

It is crucial to step back and gain balance, perspective and a sense of proportion. The incongruities of life do not need to defeat us.

INDEX OF CHARACTER

Humor is a spice and any food can be spoiled by over-spicing. What a person finds funny is an accurate index of what he considers as holy in his universe.

To persist in laughter when dealing with others' sufferings and even death, is to turn life into a comedy and reduce it to irreverence, cruelty and even meaninglessness. There is nothing funny about human suffering and death. Jokes about Helen Keller are totally out of place for those who claim to care about human beings. To poke fun at others unfortunate condition is to show total insensitivity to human pain and suffering.

In our attempts to be humorous we must zealously guard against becoming flippant. While I believe G. K. Chesterton was on target when he said,

"The test of a good religion is whether or not you can make a joke about it." However, truly sacred things like God, the cross, Holy Communion, are off limits to humor. Although there are many aspects of religion that may be humorous, as evidenced by Jesus, to make light of certain things is not only tasteless, but pure unadulterated blasphemy.

It was the German philosopher Goethe who stated, "By nothing do men show their character more clearly than by what they consider laughable." What we laugh at is a window on our mind.

"Off color" jokes are common among people who have an unhealthy interest in sex. Jokes that "put down" others often reflect insecurity on the part of the person joking.

Humor is often used to express hostility, cynicism, contempt. In the Bible we find that people laughed when Hezekiah's messengers called them to repent. They laughed when Nehemiah proposed rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. People of Job's day laughed at his excruciating suffering and distress. When Jesus said that Jairus' daughter (who had recently died) was not dead, the people laughed.
So humor can be a vicious weapon as well as a healing instrument.

Humor is bad:

"If it brings a child to tears,
If it causes something sacred to appear common,
If it makes something beautiful ugly,
If it turns cleanliness into filth,
If it capitalizes on another person's weakness,
If it needs to be off color to make it funny,
If it causes a heart to ache,
If it brings embarrassment to another."\(^\text{27}\)

The *frivolous* person treats laughter as though it is the cure for everything. The person who takes nothing seriously is a curse to society. Such people meet everything with a laugh and a funny remark. Such a perverted sense of humor will ruin spiritual growth.

The frivolous person, the one who settles down to being professional "card" all his life finds fun at the expense of others. Ridicule is often used which is really a reflection of complete detachment, of cynicism, a basic underlying lack of faith in anyone or anything.

Reinhold Niebuhr perceptively pointed out that humor has to do primarily with the *incongruities* on the surface of life. However, if there is not depth laughter becomes an expression of our sense of the meaninglessness of life.

The professional humorist Mark Twain became a cynic toward the end of his life. His fun making turned sour at its source. "Everything human is pathetic," he wrote. He continued, "The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven."\(^\text{28}\)

The frivolous person treats laughter as though it is the core for everything.

"Laughter is not the final solution to life's problems and to use it as though it were, is like beating drums in battle to drown the groans of the dying."\(^\text{29}\)

Laughter used to solve ultimate issues turns into a vehicle of bitterness rather than joy. As the Bible points out,

"There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh" (Ecc 3:1,4).

Like other rules of conduct in Scripture, we must be responsible to make decisions for ourselves as to what is appropriate and what is not in terms of humor and laughter.
A good look at our world reveals what a wry sense of humor God has. A person with a sense of humor doesn't make jokes out of life; he merely recognizes the ones that are there.

MEN’S AND WOMEN’S HUMOR

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<th>MEN’S HUMOR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source:</td>
<td>distrust, hostility, envy, jealousy</td>
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<td>singles out victims</td>
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<td>negative</td>
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<td>what one of us did</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal:</td>
<td>rhetorical one-upsmanship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Target:</td>
<td>the weak</td>
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<th>WOMEN’S HUMOR</th>
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<td>cooperative</td>
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<td>caring concern</td>
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<td>brings people together</td>
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GOD’S GIFT TO MAN

Tom Muller points out that life can be taken too seriously and likens it to swimming while wearing a tuxedo. Life seen too seriously becomes a burden. God gave us humor to save us from going nuts. If you're not a little crazy in a crazy world, you'll go nuts!

Contagious

Humor is a remedy that not only helps the patient but helps others as well. It is by nature contagious. When I take a dose of medicine it affects only me. But if I take the medicine of a cheerful heart it affects others as well. A cheerful disposition is what many people need the most. Many of us go through extremely difficult times. We rub elbows with enough kill joys to make life even more difficult. Gloom is contagious. It takes no effort to steal the blue from our neighbor's sky. But if gloom is contagious, so is joy. And we need to spread it everywhere. Remember, "the joy of the Lord is your strength!"
Laughter and joy are stifled when there is an atmosphere of criticism and tension. But when there is a willingness to accept others in a relaxed, fun-loving atmosphere, laughter and a sense of humor appear to be stimulated and cultivated. People who can appreciate one another, without resorting to cynicism and unkindness, often are able to enjoy one another—and laugh together.

If you have a sense of humor, cultivate it, laugh often and try to spread your laughter to others. For laughter is contagious.

Robert Louis Stevenson, when he was undergoing difficult circumstances in his life, testified that laughter is a better preparation for life than many other things. Notice how that in great literature when minds have been made tense by some dramatic climax, they are relaxed by the introduction of some touch of humor. Shakespeare is a master at this. It must be so in everyday life. Your laughing has a place as well as your praying. There is "a time to laugh as well as a time to weep" (Ecc 3:4).

To laugh means that the happenings around us have not got us down, that our faith is still intact. For we believe Jesus' promise:

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

Someone who presumes to know has said that it takes 64 muscles of the face to frown, but only 13 to smile. If true, this would seem to indicate that the Creator expects us to do at least five times as much smiling as frowning. What oil is to machinery, laughter is to the body and the mind.

We don't stop laughing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop laughing.

If you laugh a lot, when you get older your wrinkles will be in the right places!
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1 “IN the beginning” http://www.edwardtbabinski.us/religion/chesterton.html (3/13/2012), Page 1 of 2.
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