THE GOSPEL AND HUMOR

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I was reading a review of the movie *Prince Caspian* in a newspaper for urban downtown-types, and the article dripped with sarcastic, sneering, smirking humor that, among other things, referred to Susan's horn as a phallic symbol. Humor is like seasoning on food—everything is flat without it. But something was amiss here. I began to ask myself, "Does the gospel have an effect on our sense of humor?" The answer has to be yes—but why and how?

Your humor has a lot to do with how you regard yourself. Many people use humor to put down others, keep themselves in the driver's seat in a conversation and setting, and remind the listeners of their superior vantage point. They use humor not to defuse tension and put people at ease, but to deliberately belittle the opposing view. Rather than showing respect and doing the hard work of true disagreement, they mock others' points of view and dismiss them without actually engaging the argument.

Ultimately, sarcastic put-down humor is self-righteous—a form of self-justification—and that is what the gospel demolishes. When we grasp that we are unworthy sinners saved by an infinitely costly grace, it destroys both our self-righteousness and our need to ridicule others. This is also true of self-directed ridicule. Some people constantly and bitterly mock themselves. At first it looks like a form of humility, or realism, but really it is just as self-absorbed as the other version. It is a sign of an inner discomfort with one's self, a profound spiritual restlessness.

There is another kind of self-righteousness, however, that produces a person with little or no sense of humor. Moralistic persons often have no sense of irony, because they take themselves too seriously or because they are too self-conscious and self-absorbed in their own struggles to be habitually joyful.

The gospel, however, creates a gentle sense of irony. Our doctrine of sin keeps us from being over-awed by anyone (especially ourselves) or shocked by any behavior. We find a lot to laugh at, starting with our own weaknesses. They don't threaten us anymore, because our ultimate worth is not based on our record or performance. Our doctrine of grace and redemption also keeps us from seeing any situation as hopeless. This "ground note" of joy and peace makes humor spontaneous and natural.

In gospel-shaped humor, we don't only poke fun at ourselves. We also can gently poke fun at others, especially our friends, but it is always humor that takes the other seriously and ultimately builds them up as a show of affection. We are not to be "perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously— no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption."[1]

So how do we get such a sense of humor? That's the wrong question. The gospel doesn't change us in a mechanical way. To give the gospel primacy in our lives is not always to logically infer a series of principles from it that we then "apply" to our lives. Recently I heard a sociologist say that, for the most part, the frameworks of meaning by which we navigate our lives are so deeply embedded in us that they operate "pre-reflectively." They don't exist only as a list of propositions and formulations, but also as themes, motives, attitudes,

1. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan Co, 1949), 46.

and values that are as affective and emotional as they are cognitive and intellectual. When we listen to the gospel preached, or meditate on it in the Scripture, we are driving it so deeply into our hearts, imaginations, and thinking that we begin to "live out" the gospel instinctively.

I have definitely seen the gospel transform a person's sense of humor, but it would be artificial to say that there are "gospel-principles of humor" that we must apply to our lives. It just happens as we believe the gospel more and more.

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