

AND JESUS LAUGHED

What Do We Learn from the Humor of Christ? | Mark 7:24-30

Was Jesus Dour?

Have any of you watched or heard of the video series, THE CHOSEN? It's available for free on Amazon Prime. In my view, it's the most engaging and compelling portrayal of the story of Jesus and his disciples ever produced outside of the Bible. The Jesus the show presents is someone so warm and accessible... so brilliant and attractive... so familiar with people in all of their beauty and messiness... that it's not hard to see why – even if you were highly doubtful about religion – you might still want to follow HIM.

The directors of THE CHOSEN definitely take creative liberty in rendering the biblical stories. It's good to read the Gospels first and watch THE CHOSEN second. But what both are very good at telling us about is the humanity of Jesus – those qualities of his character and experience with which you and I can truly relate.

Have you ever noticed how the Bible pictures these things? We're told, for example, that Jesus wept (as we explored that last week). We're also told that Jesus cried out and that he got thirsty and that he slept. We're told that Jesus walked and sat and rose and got irritated at certain people. But I think it is interesting to note that nowhere in the New Testament do we EVER read the phrase: "***And Jesus laughed.***"

What do you make of that? Does that mean that one day we may find ourselves standing before a humorless God? Will he look at all of the follies of our lives and proclaim with cold detachment: "*I was not amused.*" Could that be so?

Well, if you read the Bible carefully, you'll also note that nowhere does it say, "*And Jesus chewed his food.*" I doubt we're meant to construe by that omission that Jesus swallowed his meals whole! I suspect there were some things that Jesus did SO regularly that the gospel-writers felt no need to mention them explicitly. I imagine this was the case when it came to Jesus laughing. It's why I love THIS picture of Jesus, given to me by a friend in this church.

Well, if that IS true, then why is it that we don't more often *picture* Jesus with his face lit up by a smile, with a chuckle in the face of the follies of life, with one of those deep belly laughs coming from the bottom of his being? Some of us probably do. But maybe one of the reasons some of us don't is because we have been taught that religion is a pretty serious business. And it is, in a sense. To be a follower of Jesus... to come into the presence of almighty God... is to be in the company of one who is perfectly holy. It is to encounter a magnificent Being before whom the very lack of our holiness (or purity) ought to sober us up.

Many of us, I suppose, have drawn the conclusion, therefore, that if religion is a *serious* business, it must, therefore, be a *solemn* one as well (?). Maybe we grew up under adults who told us as children that we shouldn't be giggling in the pew. Perhaps, as kids, we noticed that people rarely cracked a smile in church and drew the conclusion that God must also be an extremely solemn, sober spirit as well.

To those of us raised like this, it might have seemed almost sacrilegious to think of Jesus as a humorous guy. We may have viewed him as grave in speech and dour in expression — someone who would have agreed with the philosopher Socrates when he said: "*There must be restraint of unseasonable laughter and tears. And each of us must urge his fellows to consult decorum by utter concealment of all excessive joy or grief.*" What do you think? Is that the Jesus we meet in scripture?

Understanding the Humor of Christ

I don't think so. The Jesus we meet in the pages of the Bible and the testimony of the Apostles is not a person of tepid temperament. Why would a man whose ideal is moderation in all things ever change a hundred and fifty gallons of mere water into the finest of wines (John 2:1-12)? If Jesus thought faith was mainly about standing rigidly before the Lord, why would he picture heaven as a place where we would all be gathered around an amazing banquet table (Luke 14:15)? It seems inconceivable that Jesus—whom the religious critics of his day complained was far too comfortable around mere children and just too easy-going around the sinners of the day—had no sense of humor. Do you think that the kids and fishermen and bartenders and outcasts the Bible describes flocking to Jesus would have been drawn to him were he not someone whose eyes twinkled, and face smiled and belly laughed at the comedy and delights of life?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus *himself* said that the practice of faith should not make us look somber (Matthew 6:16). He once said that the outcome of following him, of opening ourselves to the Spirit, was that we would be filled with a more complete joy (John 15:11). So why don't we think more often about the *humor of Christ*? Maybe our memory of his Cross casts too heavy a shadow across the rest of his life for us to notice the laughter of Jesus. Or perhaps we've heard his words so often that—like old coins—the sharp relief of his teaching has become flat and dull through over-handling. Or maybe it is because we've just been so bludgeoned by the slapstick or vulgar humor that pervades the sitcoms and the standup comedy of our time that we've been desensitized to the subtle humor that characterized Christ the Rock.

The humor of Jesus relies less on familiar devices like puns or ridicule than on careful pairing of images and ideas. He doesn't seek a laugh for its own sake but rather to open up understanding. And for that purpose, Christ's preferred brand of humor is IRONY. Irony is -- the deliberate exposure of a contrast between the way things are said to be and the way things actually are. The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, says that irony is the artful contrasting of appearance with reality.

"Laughter springs from the sudden perception of incongruities." And there are so many incongruities, aren't there?

I think of the rural pastor who showed up early one Sunday to get ready for worship. As she drove into the church parking lot, she was dismayed to find that somebody's donkey had died on the front lawn of the church. She phoned the police department to have them take the donkey away, but was told they couldn't spare the resources. She then dialed the fire department and got a similar response. As the worship hour grew closer, the pastor placed a desperate call to the mayor at home. The mayor had run for office on a platform of being an accessible public servant. So, at first, he appeared to listen patiently. But being an irreligious person, he couldn't resist the chance to give the pastor a jab. *"Gosh, preacher, I thought YOU were the expert in life and death. Aren't you the obvious one to bury the donkey?"* The preacher was at the end of her patience—*"Oh, yes, mayor, I'll take care of the jackass. I'm calling you because it's my custom to notify the next of kin."*

Now, the humor of Christ is THAT kind of humor. It isn't designed to produce an external guffaw, so much as an inward gaze. Like the story of the major and the jackass, Jesus' humor is often aimed at exposing vanity and self-deception. For example, to a judgmental crowd, he says, "Have you heard the one about the self-proclaimed moral ophthalmologist who was always trying to take the speck out of other people's eye, when he had a log-sized cataract in his own eye?" (Luke 6:42)

Or to the Samaritan woman Jesus meets at a well, he says, "Go and get your husband." She replies in apparent virtue: "Oh, I have no husband." But Jesus knows more. "Well, that is technically true. You've had five husbands. And that man you've been with since the party last week, he isn't your husband, *ye*!" (John 4:17-18). Or to Peter whose shifting and undependable ways are well known to Jesus, he playfully gives the ironic title "Rocky." To the Pharisees who try to impress others with their prayer and fasting by covering their faces with ashes and going about with dismal expressions—Jesus says, "Congratulations! You've got exactly what you prayed for. Everyone can see how miserable you are for God."

Time and again with a twist of sarcasm or satire, Jesus exposes the reality beneath people's lives. Novelist, George Meredith, described Christ's style this way: *Whenever men and women wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, or pretentious... whenever they are self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly... whenever they are in variance with their professions and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws that bind us in consideration for one another... whenever they offend sound reason or fair justice, are false in humility or mined with conceit... the Spirit overhead will humanely malign them, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by vales of silvery laughter."* The laughter of God.

The Pain That Heals Us

There is a vital difference between Jesus' brand of humor and that which often passes for humor in our society today. Jesus' humor was never aimed at hurting people but at healing them. It wasn't about vaunting himself over them but about lifting them up, sometimes the hard way. Sometimes, to do his soul surgery on people, Jesus had to let them endure a bit of pain.

When I was pastoring a church in San Diego in my early thirties, I went to get my hair cut at a salon I'd never visited before. The stylist observed that I had some gray hairs starting to come in: *"Ever thought of having your hair highlighted?"* she said. "Can't say as I have," I remarked. *"Well, if we put in some highlights, it'll cover the gray right up."* "Would it show much?" I asked. *"Oh, no,"* she said, *"you'll just look a little younger."* An hour later I walked out of that salon glowing in the dark! Oh, the *pain* of facing the congregation on Sunday morning and the whispers and laughter in the corridors! Oh, the agony of going to a family wedding the next weekend and facing their jokes!

Yet, you know, it was a healing kind of pain. It felt like God was exposing how much I still trusted in the superficial for my sense of vigor or value instead of in the things of his Spirit and Kingdom. Jesus had to have been chuckling as I left that salon and many times since. I think that it was Elton Trueblood, the former chaplain at Harvard and Stanford, who observed that laughter isn't cruelly humiliating providing that we are all humiliated together.

I have a question for you: What in your life right now might bring forth the laughter of Jesus? What's the folly he sees in your life – the incongruity between what you say or appear to be and the reality of what you actually do and who you truly are? Even if others can't, God sees beneath the surface. As the prophet Samuel once observed: **People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).** The laughter that God inflicts upon us – often as his Spirit uses others to poke holes in our hypocrisy, pride or vanity – this kind of humor can be painful. But, if we let it, it can change our heart and our actions for the good, like few tools can.

At the Foot of the Table

There are all kinds of laughter, I suppose. There's the kind that sees the way things *are*. And there's also the kind that sees the way things *can be*. In that connection let me close with the story that the gospel writer Mark tells us about the time Jesus was dining one day and a woman forced her way into the house, fell at his feet beneath the table, and begged him to please heal her daughter. The woman was a Syrophenician, the scripture says, which in translation means she was one of those Gentiles, one of those outsiders whom religious Jews believed stood as much chance of receiving the grace of God as a junkyard dog had a chance of receiving a perfectly cooked ribeye.

I picture Jesus with a twinkle in his eye, giving voice to the sentiments of those around the table who would have been miffed by the audacity of this woman. He said to her: **"Shall I offer to a mere dog what I have come to give first to the children of Israel?"** And, not missing a beat, this woman who had a passion for what might yet be possible with God, responded, I think with a twinkle in *her* eye, **Lord, she replied, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."** It's not printed in the text, but I bet Jesus *laughed*... then said: **For such a reply, you may go; The demon has left your daughter (Mark 7:24-30).**

I have this vision I want to share with you as we go. In the vision, you and I are on our knees like that needy woman, only now at the final Banquet Table of God. The legs of that table stretch up so high in a spiritual sense that we can't even see the top. There we are at the very bottom, in the dust and dirt, only sensing the radiant glow of the One who occupies the head seat above.

Before our eyes pass the huge jackboots of our Accuser. Like some demonic prosecuting attorney, Satan recounts our sins -- ALL of them. Every time we spoke inappropriately... every moment when we failed to step up to the call of holiness... every need we passed by because we were too concerned about ourselves... every time we judged too harshly someone else... every secret vice and vanity... Satan knows it all and he lists it all. He calls for us to be thrown out of the house of the Lord. And, if we ever doubted, we now know that we deserve that.

It is at that moment of utter shame and hopelessness that we hear the unmistakable sound of a chair being moved back from the table. We hear thunderous footsteps coming around to our side of the table. We look up at the radiant presence of the Master himself. As he reaches toward the table, we cower instinctively. But to our shock, those nail-pierced hands begin sweeping mound after mound of mouth-watering grace over the edge of the banquet table and down upon us till we can't even consume it all. The voice of our Accuser shouts: *"I'm not finished with them yet!!"* Christ replies with a smile: "Neither am I." Satan scowls... ***And Jesus laughed.***

Please pray with me...

Great God, like that woman long ago, we come to your feet today. We offer our humble thanks that because of the Cross of Christ you do offer to us a joy and delight we could never hope to earn by our own goodness. Keep us from presuming too long upon your good humor. Help us to see ourselves, not as we seem to be, but as we truly are. In gratitude for your unconditional love, give us a passion to change where we need to change. If there is some foolish attitude that we've been clinging to or some unsundered vanity, if there is some unbridled vice or failure of love, enable us to see it, to mock it, and to turn from it we pray. For this we ask in the name of the One whose grace is greater than the gravity of this life, even Jesus, our Lord. Amen.