

And God Laughed

The devil laughs because God's world seems senseless to him; the angel laughs with joy because everything in God's world has meaning.

—*Milan Kundera*

IN PSALM 2, GOD is pictured as one who laughs at those who oppose Him. They are rulers who plot to change the world's order by banding against the Lord and against his Anointed One. United, they believe their power will prevail in the world. But God scoffs at them and rebukes them, for they don't understand that He rules over his creation. Kings are to serve God, for He has established his son as ruler in the land and will make the ends of the earth his possession. With wisdom, the rulers of the earth are to understand the truth of God's authority in the land and take refuge in Him.

Looking at this Psalm with a god's-eye view, as Mindess calls it, we can see the humor here. There is something audacious and outrageous in human pretensions when compared to God's power. In Kundera's words, "everything in God's world has meaning," and it's laughable to think human efforts can change that meaning. Indeed, it's paradoxical to reverse the order of things, to place man over God. To see things from God's point of view requires a wholistic, complete understanding of the world as He has made it.

But, as Kundera suggests, there is another worldview, one that sees God's world as senseless. This is a view that revels in frivolity and finds meaning in chaos. Rejecting God's order, it establishes its own disorder. The two worldviews and two forms of orderliness are opposed to each other, each with its own interpretation of what is humorous. And yet, in daily life, we need to understand both of these points of view if we are to

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have a good sense of humor. Defining humor as “a capacity to appreciate and understand,” Doris Donnelly suggests our sense of humor must deal with “those many puzzling, curious, and mismatched events and occurrences that permeate the dailiness of existence.”¹ In daily life, humor must enable us to cope.

But if our god’s-eye view of the world is to be complete, if it is to appreciate and understand as God does, it will also encourage us to hope. A sense of humor should expand our vision beyond the obvious and the mundane. It should move beyond the scientific and the rational when such thinking fails to explain the paradoxes of life. At this point, the “Comic Vision testifies not to the presence of what is seen, but to the as yet unknown or unproven.”²

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Kundera’s two worldviews—the one seeing the meaning in God’s world and the other believing it to be senseless—are well summed up in Patrick O’Neill’s conception of a “humor of order” and a “humor of entropy.”³ A humor of order celebrates an orderly view of life and is secure in its traditional norms and standards. As change occurs and outside forces or values threaten that order, humor is used to mock those forces and defend traditional norms while rejecting the disorder represented by the forces of change. Humor, in short, may operate as a powerful cultural technique to maintain the stability of society

A humor of entropy represents the changes opposing the orderliness of society. It reflects a worldview that parodies the traditional norms it has rejected. In a spirit of normlessness, it rejects the orderliness of a traditional life style. A humor of entropy celebrates disorder and the chaos found there. It is not concerned with how things “really are” in everyday life or what good might be found there. There is a spirit of mischievousness—even lawlessness—that seeks to reinterpret the order in society as disorder. In such a worldview, little is taken seriously—at least in the traditional sense.

In the Old Testament, God’s viewpoint is the dominant theme. Through his people, He is working for the fulfillment of creation and for

1. Donnelly, “Divine Folly,” 390.
2. Harris, “Religious Education and the Comic Vision,” 391.
3. O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy*, 46–53.

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the orderliness planned for it. His humor reflects the humor of order, of stability, and fitting in with God's plan. People are to celebrate the meaning of that order and to find there the joy God intended for them. But human sinfulness presents another viewpoint, a secondary theme of disorder that tries to disrupt God's plan. This humor is the humor of entropy. God laughs at such efforts. He mocks attempts to usurp authority from Him or to find freedom from it. From God's point of view, "the laughable becomes a link with the transcendental, measuring the finite no longer against the equally finite but against the infinite and finding the contrast infinitely ludicrous."⁴

O'Neill's comment is a reminder of the necessary transcendental quality in God's point of view. What is unreal to us is real to Him. There is a redemptive quality as well, a need to see God's orderliness as He does and to fulfill it. This is the viewpoint of Sarah, who can say, "God has brought me laughter." For mankind, the unreal must become real. And if that seems a paradoxical requirement, it is a reminder of the humor to be found there, a humor of wholeness and completeness.

The humor of entropy always occurs as well. It is the human point of view that disobeys because it disbelieves. It appears in the laughter of Abraham, who mocks God's promise to him. It is the viewpoint of the people who met the couriers of Hezekiah commanding them to "return to the Lord" and who "laughed them to scorn."⁵ The same scornful laughter was directed at Nehemiah when he began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.⁶ This is the viewpoint which, O'Neill claims, increasingly rejects the orderliness of the world as we have known it. Indeed, the humor of entropy,

traditionally relegated to the margins of serious discourse, has increasingly impinged on areas where its presence would once have been unthinkable—to the point, indeed, [that it] . . . represents a paradigm change of major significance in the way we see the world around us.⁷

4. *Ibid.*, 43.

5. 2 Chronicles 30:10.

6. Nehemiah 2:19.

7. *Ibid.*, 13.

Balance in Humor

O'Neill's observation is a major point to be developed in later chapters. Now, we want to return to God's point of view, especially as it is found in the Old Testament where there is a tension between God's orderliness and human disobedience, between one sense of reality and another. Repeatedly, we find laughter of derision as God points out the flaw in human thinking which assumes it can challenge God's order. This can be seen in Psalm 2 or Job 41:29, where God "shall have them in derision" and "laugheth at the shaking of a spear." Laughter of joy erupts when God's order is recognized and accepted as real and true. As Bildad says to Job, "[God] will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy."⁸ This is laughter of hope which sees the flaw in human thinking and the possible in the seemingly impossible.

Humor in the Old Testament provides insight into its basic themes, helping us to understand God's relations with his people and their response to him. However, it is a humor that must be taken seriously and interpreted in terms of the paradoxes God presents to his people and his ultimate plan for them. Humor is not to be a display of frivolity or playfulness. It is in this spirit that the writer of Ecclesiastes says, "Laughter is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish."⁹ It is the trivial side of laughter that is scorned, not the serious.

In *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, the propriety of laughter for the Christian is debated by William of Baskerville and Jorge, the librarian of the monastery. William, the hero of this intriguing tale, claims that laughter is proper to humans, that it symbolizes human rationality and may be used to show foolishness in the wicked. As the villain in the story, Jorge holds an opposing view; laughter signals merriment and encourages doubt. The comic world is the reverse of that established by God; it is weakness and foolishness of the flesh. Worse, laughter and comedy become art forms and the object of philosophy. Ultimately, Jorge claims, comedy would encourage "defect, fault, weakness—would induce false scholars to try to redeem the lofty with a diabolical reversal: through the acceptance of the base."¹⁰

8. Job 8:21.

9. Ecclesiastes 2:2.

10. Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 578.

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Jorge's argument has merit; much in God's creation has been trivialized with humor. But Jorge assumes the humor of entropy will dominate God's orderly creation. He believes human efforts to reverse this order and laugh at it will, in the long run, replace God's plan for the world. The comic spirit will be the means by which humans free themselves from God's authority. Apparently, Jorge lacks faith while trying to be faithful.

William is more generous in his view of humor because he doesn't fear it. There is a need to balance the serious with the humorous. Humor is a means to edifying ends, not an end in itself. "Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh*."¹¹ Humor points out the flaws in truth as people like Jorge see it. Laughter allows us "to free ourselves from insane passion for truth." At the same time, laughter allows us to look beyond truth, to transcend it, and understand the faith Jorge lacked.

There is another way to compare these two views of laughter; Jorge didn't understand paradox and, perhaps, even feared it. The idea of a world that was the opposite of what God created was nonsensical to him. There was no place for negativity in his thinking. He believed images which are not faithful reproductions of God's world distort the world and lead to corrupt and blasphemous thought. William, however, accepted paradox as part of God's world. Negativity, for him, could be a means to understand the truth. He rejected Jorge's notion that the imagination could not indulge carnal enjoyment. Instead, William believed the imagination was free to play with these inconsistencies and find new, and perhaps richer, meanings in them.

A god's-eye view of the world recognizes these contradictions in the world and attempts to interpret them. It understands the world isn't perfect and accepts it that way. Human depravity will always be there, and with it, the foolishness and even the sin that Jorge feared. But it is because of such contradictions, such flaws in the social order, that humor can exist. Because of human frailty and disorder, we know something more of God's perfection and order. What we don't understand is how to respond to it. Humor, by itself, provides no hope.

11. *Ibid.*, 598.

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Transcendence in Humor

Referring to the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, Donnelly describes how faith and humor are related.

Taking a god's-eye view, people step back and gain the balance, perspective, and sense of proportion necessary to match up against the incongruities besetting them. In this way . . . humor is a starting point in the life of faith. Religious faith offers the deep insight that the incongruities of life do not need to defeat us. An ultimate victory over powers that seem insurmountable *is possible*.¹²

While humor may provide a basis for faith, it is also true that faith is a basis for humor. It offers another reality to consider, one that contradicts that which we accept in everyday life. Put more simply, faith frees us to laugh.

This view of faith and humor implies a *transcendent* perspective on reality, one that requires a belief in what might be considered unreal. God scoffs at kings of the earth in Psalm 2 because he has installed his King, who “will rule them with an iron scepter.” This laughter of derision comes because of God’s knowledge of what He has already done but what is not apparent to people. God sees the latent weakness of the kings, not their apparent strength. While coming at the expense of others, this knowing laughter recognizes God’s provision. Laughter may also be a manifestation of joy when faith expresses thankfulness for this provision. This is the laughter of the virtuous woman, in Proverbs 31:25, who laughs “at the days to come.” In either case, faith completes the humor; it acknowledges God’s order and accepts it as good.

However, laughter may also express disbelief, as in the case of Abraham and Sarah. It lacks a god’s-eye view of transcendence and the faith it implies. At the same time, it rejects the notion of paradox. Without belief, there is a limited sense of truth, a one-dimensional sense of reality. In Abraham’s case, he was unable to believe in anything but a natural view of birth. Perhaps that is why William of Baskerville says humor is “to make truth laugh.” Humor is to expand our point of view and show us the contradictions in life, especially those that push us to see things as God does. In short, humor should show us the paradoxes that transcend the realities of everyday life.

12. Donnelly, “Divine Folly,” 391.

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Humor, then, can point us to God's order and help us to understand how it impinges on our human disorder. Faith focuses on paradoxes and offers hope. It implies sharing God's laughter as we come to accept his view of the world. Holy laughter, if we could call it that, points to our weaknesses and inherent sinfulness. In Wittgenstein's view, it plays the game according to God's rules and expectations. It is then we find a redemptive quality in humor.

Cultural humor results when we don't respond to God's view of the world; we take his expectations and put them in our pocket. Without faith, we focus only on the human order and the contradictions there. Such humor has only social meaning and lacks the spiritual dimension faith may provide. Laughter responds only to the weakness of others and not to the strength of God. Without transcendence, such laughter may become trivialized as it conforms to cultural expectations.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, God is on stage and actively involved in his Creation. He speaks to his people, warning them, telling them what He will do. His law defines his order and expresses his authority. His laughter is directed at human foibles and pretensions. In the New Testament, God is off-stage, so to speak. It is Jesus, the Son of God, who brings God's order into human disorder, but it is a covert order that is inconsistent with what people have known. Wherever He goes, Jesus reverses the meaning of things; water is made into wine, and death is changed to life. He is always at the center of contradiction and apparent disorder. People are unsure of who He is or what He is doing. He calls them to faith so they will understand, so they will make much that could arouse laughter.

But there is little laughter in the New Testament; you don't find Jesus sharing jokes with the disciples. Indeed, James tells us to change laughter to mourning.¹³ The crowd laughs at Jesus for believing a dead child could be raised to life, but this was because they lacked faith, and Jesus apparently promises laughter to those who weep because of faith.¹⁴ The humor in the New Testament—and there is much there—calls us to respond with faith, not laughter. There is a transcendent quality to this humor as

13. James 4:9.

14. Mathew 9:24; Mark 5:40; Luke 8:53, 6:21.

it points to another reality, a sense of the ultimate that waits for faith to make it real for the believer.

It is this transcendent quality that provides so much of what is unexpected in humor. Frederick Buechner claims that the unforeseeable is the critical element in the comic.¹⁵ There is much truth in this claim, especially when we remember that faith completes humor. Faith allows the unforeseeable to be foreseen. We couldn't expect Jesus to calm the waves or to raise Lazarus from the dead unless we first believed these were ridiculous acts. Faith shifts our thinking from a belief that these acts are impossible to the belief that they are possible. Nor could we expect Jesus to challenge the Pharisees unless we understood his mission and believe, through faith, in it. Once we believe and understand that mission, we have faith and take things seriously. Inconsistencies are resolved and paradoxes make sense. If faith doesn't stretch our vision, if it doesn't move us into new vistas of the unknown, we lose our sense of the comic and the development of our faith.

The Possibility of Paradox

Throughout the New Testament there is a juxtaposition of the foreseen and the unforeseen. We could predict that Jesus would be a concerned guest when the wine ran out at the marriage in Cana, but we could not have expected him to change water into wine. Surely his disciples realized Jesus might make a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but not riding on a donkey. Peter Berger calls such a discrepancy the essence of the comic spirit.¹⁶ The spiritual "unmasks" anything that is pretentious or artificial by showing the flaw in it. Jesus does this when he shows the people the foolishness of the Pharisees and they respond with laughter or faith. In the New Testament, this discrepancy is "between spirit and all that which is not." He also unmasks the unbelief of the crowds with miracles of healing. In each case, we gain a new sense of truth, a truth that William of Baskerville would say laughs at folly.

There is a dialectic in the unforeseen that leads to the discrepancy which Conrad Hyers calls "the dialectic of the sacred and the comic."¹⁷ He sees this dialectic as an ongoing interchange between the serious cosmos

15. Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 57.

16. Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 123.

17. *Ibid.*, 208–240.

and the playful chaos.¹⁸ This interchange reveals the relationship between the cosmos and the chaos and the way each, as the negation of the other, also represents something of that other. Standing at the intersection of that dialectic, we have a choice. We might take the cosmic view, and like Jorge, reject anything playful or chaotic. We might, instead, move to the side of chaos and reject anything orderly. In either case, we lose the comic spirit and the dialectic it requires.

Reinhold Niebuhr's analysis of humor and faith leads us into a more discerning view of the problem.¹⁹ While both humor and faith deal with the incongruities of life, "humour is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones."²⁰ We laugh at those immediate incongruities but respond with faith to those ultimate incongruities of life that threaten us. The problem is to understand the difference; when do we laugh and when do we believe? The answer to this question would seem to come from scripture, where "humor manages to resolve incongruities by the discovery of another level of congruity."²¹

It is this other "level of congruity," a transcendental level, that we look for in scripture. It is the reason why paradox becomes a necessary, as well as a possible, element in faith. This is not to say that all paradox is humorous. The contradictory condition called sin in Romans 7, in which Paul doesn't do the good he would do and does the evil he would not do, certainly is a serious matter. While we might chuckle at some of the paradoxical experiences of daily life, ultimately we must take them seriously. Faith makes that seriousness possible.

The Romans 7 passage makes us aware of the personal dimension of sin. There is a tension there that cannot be clearly resolved. Daily, we know we do what we don't want to do and don't do what we want to do. But the reality of this condition, once we are sensitized to it, may become so burdensome that we don't take it seriously. We want to escape it, or at least, learn to cope and let it go at that. Niebuhr's approach—to resolve the incongruity by raising it to another level of congruity—returns us to faith as a resolution of the paradox; we learn to hope instead of to cope. But we need to deal with the reality of sin on both levels; we need to cope with

18. *Ibid.*, 214.

19. *Ibid.*, 134–149.

20. *Ibid.*, 135.

21. *Ibid.*

the sin in others by laughing and to hope for redemption from the sin in ourselves by believing. Paradoxically, we deal with sin with both humor and faith.

Humor brings the immediate incongruities of life to our attention, and we resolve them with laughter. However, the ultimate incongruities are less apparent. They are humorous, but we don't always see the humor in them. Often, they are more likely to be centered in sorrow and difficulty. They are always unforeseen and usually are a discrepancy in our daily lives. They come to us with a sense of awe, and perhaps even mystery. Always, Elton Trueblood claims, they involve a connection that links the two parts of the incongruity.²² Like a punch line in a joke, the connection in a contradiction makes the point. And like the punch line, the connection is not readily apparent. A certain point of view, a worldview, is needed to see the connection that makes sense of the incongruity.

Worldview and Paradox

Johnny Hart, the prize winning creator of *B.C.* and the *Wizard of Id*, uses comic strips to bring together the immediacy of humor and the ultimacy of faith. At Easter season, he has a caveman complain to his wife that fruit juice stained his suit. The caveman's wife takes it to a lake to wash it and is surprised to find herself engulfed by a red liquid. More surprising, she finds her husband's clothes and herself have turned white. Baffled, they turn to see three crosses on a hill with a flow of blood coming from the center cross.²³ A similar Easter strip showed a cross on a hill. Suddenly, it is zapped by two lightning bolts. The cross plummets into hell and then rebounds like a rocket into space. From a burning bush come the words, "That's my boy!"²⁴

Such strips may offend those who, with Jorge, share the point of view required to understand the strip. The connection between the immediate and the ultimate in a dialectic is not always understood, especially when the context of a comic strip seems to require a comic point of view and nothing more. Hart has another approach, which satirizes religion. A caveman climbs a mountain to ask a guru of wonders to come. The guru recites the usual: famines, pestilences, and earthquakes. But, the caveman

22. Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*, 41.

23. *B.C.*, Johnny Hart, Creators Syndicate, Inc., April 16, 1995.

24. *B.C.*, Johnny Hart, Creators Syndicate, Inc., March 30, 1997.

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asks, "What's the good news?" The guru responds, "God will wipe away every tear . . . and there shall be no more death nor sorrow nor pain." The caveman asks how he can know such things. Showing a Bible in his hands, the guru replies, "Nobody escapes the Gideons."²⁵ In a similar vein, the watchman in the *Wizard of Id* announces to the city that an earthquake is occurring. People frantically run about with warnings: "Evacuate the castle!" "Release the horses!" "Save the women and children!" The king appears from his castle window and shouts "Raise the price on Bibles!"²⁶

We should look behind the humor in these strips to note an important point. The first two strips present to the reader ultimate incongruities which, Niebuhr claims, are necessary to raise our understanding to a spiritual level. On this level, we understand the incongruities by faith. The second set of strips does not require a particular view point from the reader. There is incongruity, yes, but it can be interpreted from everyday experience with Christian groups and economics. These are incongruities that anyone can understand and chuckle over. But there is also an implicit warning: we might become too serious in our daily spiritual lives if we don't temper our faith with a dash of humor. While the first set of strips suggests the need of awe, the second set suggests the need of humility.

Religion, like humor, finds in every paradox a dominant and a subordinate voice, an ultimate and an immediate theme. A point of view provides a link that leads to faith or laughter. In the Old Testament, God clearly presents this link as obedience to Him. Faith, for Abraham and Sarah, simply meant taking God at his word. Moses, Gideon, and others experienced the same challenge; nothing was preposterous or laughable if God was obeyed. In the New Testament, the emphasis shifts. Faith is more a matter of believing than of obedience. The challenge is to understand, first, what Jesus meant and then to obey. Jesus himself was a profound paradox. When He asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" He wanted to know what they believed, what their point of view was. Did people see Him as a prophet or as the Son of God? That viewpoint would determine how people would interpret Jesus and his message. It would indicate whether people would see Jesus as a paradox, in immediate or ultimate terms. It was a serious question to be met with faith, not a trivial one to be mocked with laughter.

25. B.C., Johnny Hart, Creators Syndicate, Inc., August 26, 1990.

26. *Wizard of Id*, Brant Parker and Johnny Hart, News America Syndicate, March 22, 1987.

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In the Old Testament, God knew his people. They were often disobedient and unfaithful, but they understood their relationship to God as his chosen people. The problem was to express that relationship in faithful obedience. Jesus faced a different problem. It was necessary for Him to find his followers, to identify those who believed in him. For this reason, the paradox became an important test to separate believers from unbelievers, those who took the paradox seriously and those who chuckled among themselves. The question was whether a person could understand the critical link in a paradox that moved understanding to a new level of congruity, a transcendent level that brought redemption with belief.

The Problem of Parables

When the disciples come to Jesus to inquire why He speaks to the people in parables, He replies they have been given “the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.”²⁷ But others don’t understand or believe because the “heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes.”²⁸ Parables are paradoxical because they use a story from everyday life to teach a lesson of ultimate and spiritual meaning. For this reason, parables are important teaching devices if the link between the immediate and the ultimate is to be grasped. Taken literally, parables may be preposterous and even humorous. It is the meaning hidden in words, and how they are used, that makes parables more than educational tools.

Jesus, apparently, did not use parables simply for their educational value. His other concern was to filter out those who understood the paradox in the parables and believed. Humor, remember, separates persons with different points of view—those who take the paradox seriously and those who don’t. For this reason: “He did not say anything to them without using a parable.”²⁹ It was to fulfill the saying in Psalm 78:2: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”³⁰ The teaching came “when He was alone with his own disciples,

27. Mathew 13:11.

28. Mathew 13:15.

29. Mark 4:34a.

30. Mathew 13:35.

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He explained everything.”³¹ In Jesus’ ministry, parables provide both paradox and pedagogy.

Our concern, of course, is with the paradox, and especially, with the humorous dimension in parables that leads us to greater understanding of the truths communicated in them. Trueblood lists 30 humorous passages in the Gospels, many of them parables.³² What they have in common is the use of metaphors which link the paradoxical elements of the ultimate and the immediate. Such metaphors as the plow, the seed, the yoke, the door, and many others are all associated with some spiritual truth to bring greater meaning to that truth. The objective is to see the similarity in apparent differences; how a door, for example, could represent Christ. Trueblood suggests that much of the paradox in parables involves word play called “paronomasia.”³³ Much of this word play carries over from the Old Testament and loses its meaning in translation. But Jesus’ use of metaphor is exaggerated, even preposterous; camels going through eyes of needles and mountains moving. It is intended to make a strong point for those who are to hear, regardless of culture or background.

Trueblood considers the parable of the wineskins to be the finest example of humor in the parables.³⁴ The old wineskins, representing Jewish law and custom, cannot contain the freshness of the Kingdom of God as Jesus is bringing it to the people. New ways, like new wineskins, are needed. The double parable, using the reference to patching a garment, makes the same point. But, Trueblood says, the punch line is in verse 39: “And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, ‘The old is better.’” Some, Jesus says, will prefer the old ways, such as fasting, even after experiencing the new. This statement, made right after the argument for new wineskins, produces a dilemma; can old wine be put into new wineskins? Spoken in the presence of Pharisees for whom the comment was apparently intended, Jesus’ statement carries some irony and the humor it implies. If the Pharisees want to keep the old wine they will have to keep the old, leaky wineskins as well.

Other parables point out the more ludicrous aspects found in paradox. Ending the parable of the sower, Jesus states, “Whoever does not have,

31. Mark 4:34.

32. Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*, 127.

33. *Ibid.*, 34.

34. *Ibid.*, 94–98.

even what he has will be taken from him.”³⁵ What a foolish statement if one is thinking only of the material world and the natural order. How can anything be taken from someone who has nothing to begin with? When Peter comes to Jesus to ask how many times he should forgive his brother, Jesus replies, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.”³⁶ Taken literally, this is an exacting and impossible expectation. One can imagine the foolishness of trying to meet this demand. But the Pharisees had become literalists; they were exacting in the application of legal minutiae. Jesus’ statement was intended not only to convey a sense of the Kingdom of God, but also to poke fun at the literal-minded of his day.

Literalism as a Problem

However, it is the literal-minded who would not understand the parable. They could not make the connection in the paradox or get the point of a joke. Literal-mindedness is a worldview that accepts a certain form of orderliness and rejects others as disorderly. For that reason, Jesus spoke in parables; to gain the support of those who could understand the Kingdom of God as a new order that substituted the spirit for the letter of the law. Jesus often reversed the symbolism of the social order and the natural order as he moved among the unprivileged and outcasts of society. Small coins were worth more than great wealth, for example, and the prodigal son was valued more than the working son. Literal-mindedness understands only the precise meaning of words and the clear definition of relationships. Literalists are always predictable and consistent as they fit into every nook and cranny of society’s expectations. They are like old wine in old wineskins.

To make humor work, there must be a comic reversal, a second theme that finds a flaw in the primary theme and brings it into question. The parables do this by setting off the Kingdom of God against Pharisaism. We might not find much humor in the parable of the Pharisee who prides himself on his legalism and the tax collector who is humbled by sin.³⁷ But for some of those who heard Jesus, this reversal must have been comic. Such behavior was clearly unexpected and inconsistent with their experience. Others would have seen the truth in the parable and nodded in

35. Matthew 13:12.

36. Matthew 18:22.

37. Luke 18:9–14.

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agreement. The first group responded with laughter and the second with faith. There is also a third group, those who neither believe nor laugh. For them, the parable remains a paradox without explanation or meaning.

In his ministry, Jesus brought disorder wherever He went; He reversed what was natural and disorganized people's expectations. Much of this reversal was humorous. Often the humor was unintended and only apparent to those who did not see or hear what was intended. On other occasions, the humor was intentional. Consider, for example, his entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey to fulfill scripture. Jesus wanted to illustrate humility when royalty was expected, and even justifiable. Whatever He did shook up the familiar categories of life and often the values associated with them.

The Comic Hero

The clown is a study in self-contradiction.³⁸ As the quintessential clown, Charlie Chaplin was both a bum and a gentleman. At the same time that he tips his hat to a lady, he might pick up a cigarette from the street. His clothing, symbolic of class and status, masked his vagrancy and homelessness. A perpetual outsider, he was also an insider who gained entrance where others would be rejected. Paradoxically, his contradiction succeeds in a society that scorns contradiction. In his films, Chaplin is the hero who rescues the child from a burning building and is rewarded with a large sum of money or walks off into the sunset with the leading lady. In a world of propriety, his impropriety pays off.

From his birth, Jesus manifested the same self-contradiction; He was both human and divine. As God's son, He was to bring a new order - the Kingdom of God, but as Joseph's son, He brought disorder and confusion. For centuries, prophets had told of his coming as the Messiah, but when He came, people wondered whom He was. As King of Kings, He was treated worse than a murderer. Although He was sinless, He took upon himself the sins of others. In each case, He was a paradox who provoked either laughter or faith in people. For many, He was a tragic figure. For others, He was a comic figure. In either case, He fulfilled Northrop Frye's words: "tragedy is an episode in that larger scheme of redemption and resurrection to which Dante gave the name of 'commedia.'"³⁹

38. For development of this point see Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 75-88.

39. Quoted in Hyers, *And God Created Laughter*, 33.

Peter Berger could have had Dante in mind when he said: “Comedy is a signal, an intimation of transcendence. It is here that its Christian significance is to be found.”⁴⁰ And it is the clown, Berger suggests, who best represents the transcendent quality in comedy. It is the clown who continually cuts against the grain of society with his antics. He creates laughter by having people understand their foibles, even their sinfulness. He unmasks human pretensions and pokes holes in social facades. If life were composed of such flimsy structures—if laughter could destroy us so quickly—it would be tragic. But, Berger claims, in the art of the clown, “there is a faint hint of redemption”; there is hope for something more.⁴¹ It is in Jesus that this redemptive quality becomes a reality.

Tom Boyd describes the clown as an outsider who is both innocent and intentional.⁴² As an outsider, the clown takes a god’s-eye view of the world, one that can look at society honestly and objectively. Unemotionally, he sees life more deeply and more completely than others. Consequently, he challenges society with his attitudes and actions, exposing its unacknowledged weaknesses. Pitting the sacred against the social, the religious clown displays the disorder coexisting with order and encourages us to laugh at it. He helps us to understand that this world is not to be taken seriously. In the same way, Jesus shows us an alternative to life as we know it and the joy to be found in that alternative.

But Jesus never laughed.⁴³ Unlike God, he did not mock his enemies or laugh derisively at them. Instead, he asked God to forgive them, setting an example for us to follow. He sets a model for humility as well as faithfulness. Laughter, remember, implies a superiority of self and a weakness of others. Humor, however, implies wholeness, completeness. It also implies how things may be told or read. Humor implies a sense of the ideal and the reality, of the present and the future, of the now and then. Humor is not concerned with how things “really are.”⁴⁴ There is always the hope for improvement—that victory may come from apparent failure. Jesus provides that hope, not with laughter but with another expression of victory, Resurrection.

40. Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 127.

41. *Ibid.*, 129.

42. Boyd, “Clowns, Innocent Outsiders in the Sanctuary,” 101–109.

43. Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 137. Sanders suggests that some scholars have attributed a sense of humor to Jesus although there is no record of his laughter.

44. For this important distinction, see O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy*, 53.

And God Laughed

Hyers refers to the sense of humor found in Easter by earlier Christian groups. In the early Greek Orthodox tradition, clergy and laity gathered in the sanctuary the day after Easter to tell jokes and anecdotes as a way of celebrating how the Resurrection fooled Satan. In Slavic areas, a similar celebration occurred the day after Easter. Indeed, in the early church, Easter was seen as a “big joke,” and Jesus was represented “as the bait in the mousetrap with which Satan was caught.”⁴⁵ While we might wince today at this apparent merger of the hilarious and the holy, we certainly recognize the joy in the Resurrection. The problem is to decide how that joy is to be expressed and what it is to be called.

It’s helpful to remember the principle of wholism, which accepts the joy in sorrow and the order in disorder. These are paradoxes best understood with the help of humor, especially when taken seriously. As a comic hero, Jesus’ actions and words were comical but his intentions were serious. Certainly He wanted to be taken seriously by the crowds who followed him. He wanted them to see the orderliness in his disorder, the positive in the negative. It was in the Resurrection that the paradox was most clearly resolved. It was then that God could laugh and the devil could mourn at a senseless world made sensible.

CONCLUSION

From God’s point of view, laughter is a sign of victory. The Resurrection is a triumph worthy of God’s laughter because it points to the flaw in Satan’s plan. It reflects the divine comedy planned in heaven, which encompasses and surpasses the tragedy enacted on earth. But to understand this point of view, to see things as God does, requires faith. One must believe that Jesus is the connecting link in the paradox, the means by which there is congruity in incongruity. This is laughter that is faithful, laughter that shares God’s point of view. Jesus didn’t laugh on earth because the victory had not been completed. Faithful laughter is possible after the Resurrection, after we understand the paradox of God’s plan of order for the world.

As with all humor, laughter becomes the means by which we share the worldview of another. God’s laughter is contagious for believers. It is to be shared with joy and assurance, but it is not to be trivialized. It is not intended as a means for dealing with the contradictions of being fallen. It is not the kind of laughter often employed in everyday life. This is “fallen

45. Hyers, *And God Created Laughter*, 25.

laughter”; it “is the kind we employ when we wish to ridicule someone or elevate ourselves above others.”⁴⁶ With such laughter, we laugh at others, not with them. It is fallen because it is not the gift of God. Such laughter is part of the humor of entropy, which celebrates disorder and confusion. Rather than unifying, it fragments and disorganizes. If faithful laughter is godly, then fallen laughter is devilish.

An important point here should not be missed. We share God’s laughter because we share his point of view. In other words, his worldview is the basis for our faithful laughter. But as we employ fallen laughter—as we laugh, often without thinking, at the trivialities in daily life—our worldview may be affected. Gradually, the importance of the trivial may overcome the importance of the transcendent. We may even see the disorderly in order and falsehood in truth. And, if there is paradox, there is difficulty in raising our understanding to a higher level of congruity. In short, we may see things from a different worldview, one that is more likely to be Satanic than sanctified.

46. *Ibid.*, 15.