

The Medicine of Laughter Spurgeon's Humor

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Some years ago there was a documented case in the *British Medical Journal* about a man who laughed himself well. He actually had a terminal illness, and through the employment of laughter therapy, he allowed his body to successfully fight the disease.

While we may smilingly acknowledge the merit of such a case, for the most part, we find such an incident almost incredible. Can laughter really be that good for us? The Bible definitely supports such a notion.

The Bible advocates laughter

The writer of Ecclesiastes stated: "*There's a time to laugh, and a time to cry*" (Ecclesiastes 3:4). We know that there are plenty of reasons to cry. Just a casual glance at our world, with its wars, hatred, violence and evil — makes us sad. Every day we see/hear on the news horrible accounts of hurting people who hurt others. We are grieved at the plight of so many persons who are living in darkness and have rejected the light of Christ. The stark reality of sin in our world is indeed sobering.

It's not surprising that many of us as leaders may be more inclined toward sadness than to joy. Given the nature and demands of Christian leadership in an increasingly challenging world, one could cynically surmise that leaders may have more reason to be glum than glad these days. The pressures of our organizational responsibilities, and the accompanying stresses, can drag us down. Handling church conflict, losing someone special, helplessly seeing a marriage dissolve, experiencing personal betrayal, facing an unsuspected tragedy — all may give cause for tears.

To counter the sad times, the Scripture also advises that there is a time to laugh. Leaders need to know the balancing therapy of laughter. Toward that goal, we should fully embrace the joys of ministry — celebrating special moments with members, "high-

iving” family achievements, relishing the reaching of hard-earned goals, and savoring the blessing of spiritual growth. But those experiences may still fall short of the biblical pronouncement regarding laughter. C'mon, when was the last time you laughed so hard you cried?! Or, you actually had a good belly laugh?

Spurgeon's great sense of humor

Many evangelicals know well the stern side of C. H. Spurgeon and his serious pursuit of the holy life. Indeed, his stands for righteous causes, and countering doctrinal error are often recounted. But many readers may not know that he was a man with a great sense of humor. Spurgeon knew the value of laughter and mirth. He virtually took to heart the word in Proverbs 17:22: “*A merry heart doeth good like a medicine.*”

Spurgeon laughed as often as he could. He laughed at the ironies of life, he laughed at comical incidents, he laughed at the amusing elements of nature. He sometimes laughed at his critics. He loved to share wholesome jokes with his friends and colleagues in ministry. He was known to tell humorous stories from the pulpit. William Williams, a fellow pastor who kept company with Spurgeon, was a near and dear friend in the latter years of Spurgeon's life. He wrote:

What a bubbling fountain of humour Mr. Spurgeon had! I laughed more, I verily believe, when in his company than during all the rest of my life besides. He had the most fascinating gift of laughter . . . and he had also the greatest ability for making all who heard him laugh with him. When someone blamed him for saying humourous things in his sermons, he said, “He would not blame me if he only knew how many of them I keep back.”¹

Spurgeon considered humor such an integral part of his ministry that a whole chapter in his autobiography is devoted to it. Humor permeates his sermons and writings, often woven into the fabric of his messages. It's one reason among many why he is still so readable today.

The therapy of laughter

Spurgeon knew the blessing of the treatment of humor. He often spoke of his illness in humorous terms: “I have had sharp pains,” he wrote to a friend, “but I am recovering. Only my back is broken, and I need a new vertebrae.”² Once, when he was feeling depressed, he spoke of the remedy of laughter:

The other evening I was riding home after a heavy day's work. I felt wearied and sore depressed, when swiftly and suddenly that text came to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee.’ I reached home and looked it up in the original, and at last it came to me in this way. ‘My grace is sufficient for

¹ William Williams, *Personal Remembrances of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1895), 24.

² *Ibid*, 231.

THEE.' And I said, 'I should think it is, Lord,' and I burst out laughing. I never understood what the holy laughter of Abraham was till then. It seemed to make unbelief so absurd...O brethren, be great believers. Little faith will bring your souls to heaven, but great faith will bring heaven to your souls.³

Some of Spurgeon's humor even bordered on the cynical — like the time he was embroiled in the Baptismal Regeneration Controversy. When Spurgeon took on the Church of England clerics because of their belief in baptismal regeneration, he had a baptismal font installed in his back garden as a birdbath. He referred to it as “the spoils of war.” While the great “Prince of Preachers” may have gone over the top on that one, for the most part, his humor was balanced and appropriate.

Laughter a needful release

Laughter is an important release in a leader's life. It is much-needed therapy for positions that are most often fraught with stress and the burdens of the day. Certainly there is a time to be sober as we face many tough situations in our lives and ministries. But, we need to learn how to experience the relief of laughter. Part of the problem is that too many of us take ourselves way too seriously. When we forget that God has a sense of humor, we need to do as one leader suggested — go look in the mirror!

Spurgeon knew the value of laughter and humor. Both in tough times and sick times, humor was a means for him to deal with his situation. It was a coping mechanism for him. There will always be seasons of sadness and joy for the conscientious leader. But, the leader who learns to balance the two, will learn the discipline of employing laughter and joy in his life. It could very well make a difference in his fulfillment and purpose in his service to the Lord.

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³ *Ibid*, 25.

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