

"THE MARKS OF A MAN"

Third in a Series of Sermons

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by

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III

"A Sense of Humor"

Text: John 10:10

"The thief comes only to steal and destroy, I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

I don't see how anyone can successfully thrive in 1969 without a sense of humor. It seems to me that the graduate of 1969 should possess a buoyant attitude toward life, an enjoyment of living that is both inwardly rewarding and outwardly contagious. I am sure you may wonder why I have placed such a high value upon this cheerful attribute: perhaps it is in reaction against the gravity of our year. This has been on the whole a cheerless year, and it may well be the case that there is less happiness and authentic celebration today than ever before in Western history. The reasons for this state of affairs are not easily uncovered. So much is going for Western man but the results are disappointing: we have more freedom than ever before but less spontaneity, we have more leisure time than have any people any time, and yet more boredom. Remember the classic Graduate Ben who is free to do and go and be what he wants with indulgent, wealthy parents to buy his sports car, keep the swimming pool filled, and yet Ben is bored unmercifully. We have more power and yet the complexities of power have baffled us and have resulted in the peace of terror and intense inner controversy. We have fewer real obligations now that family planning has reduced the number of children, medicare removes any obligation we might feel toward our aged parents and the State never really abandons us, and yet emptiness and lack of personal meaning has poisoned even this benefit. In other words, we have a thousand reasons for being happy, yet with less happiness than we want. We are experiencing the phenomenon of an ever-increasing effort toward happiness with an ever diminishing result.

Certainly our generation has combined wit and imagination toward the task of cheering up daily routine; in fact, Rowan and Martin's Laugh In has recorded more laughs per one hour TV show than ever before observed in the history of the entertainment business. I do not mean that with this graveness there is an absence of laughter, but it is the cause and meaning of human laughter that I am concerned with probing.

The most classic discussion of laughter that I am aware of is found in a single chapter of C. S. Lewis' book "Screwtape Letters." C. S. Lewis has recorded for us some letters he found that were written by a senior devil, "Screwtape" to a junior devil "Wormwood." One of the letters goes as follows:

"My dear Wormwood,

"Everything is clearly going very well. I am specially glad to hear that the two new friends have now made him acquainted with their whole set. All these, as I find from the record office, are thoroughly reliable people, steady, consistent scoffers and worldlings who without any spectacular crimes are progressing quietly and comfortably towards our Father's house. You speak of their being great laughers. I trust this does not mean that you are under the impression that laughter as such is always in our favour. The point is worth some attention.

"I divide the causes of human laughter into Joy, Fun, the Joke Proper and Flippancy. You will see the first among friends and lovers reunited on the eve of a holiday. Among adults some pretext in the way of Jokes is usually provided but the facility with which the smallest witticisms produce laughter at such a time shows that they are not the real cause. What that real cause is we do not know. Something like it is expressed in much of that detestable art which the humans call Music, and something like it occurs in Heaven--a meaning acceleration in the rhythm of celestial experience, quite opaque to us. Laughter of this kind does us no good and should always be discouraged. Besides, the phenomenon is of itself disgusting and a direct insult to the realism, dignity and austerity of Hell.

"Funn is closely related to Joy--a sort of emotional froth arising from the play instinct. It is very little use to us. It can sometimes be used, of course, to divert humans from something else which the Enemy would like them to be feeling or doing: but in itself it has wholly undesirable tendencies; it promotes charity, courage, contentment, and many other evils.

"The Joke Proper, which turns on sudden perception of incongruity, is a much more promising field. I am not thinking primarily of indecent or bawdy humour, which, though much relied upon by second-rate tempters, is often disappointing in its results.....

"The real use of Jokes or Humour is in quite a different direction, and it is specially promising among the English who take their 'sense of humour' so seriously that a deficiency in this sense is almost the only deficiency at which they feel shame. Humour is for them the all-consoling and (mark this) the all-excusing, grace of life. Hence it is invaluable as a means of destroying shame. If a man simply lets others pay for him, he is 'mean;' if he boasts of it in a jocular manner and twits his fellows with having been scored off, he is no longer 'mean' but a comical fellow. Mere cowardice is shameful; cowardice boasted of with humorous

exaggerations and grotesque gestures can be passed off as funny. Cruelty is shameful--unless the cruel man can represent it as a practical joke. A thousand bawdy, or even blasphemous, jokes do not help towards a man's damnation so much as his discovery that almost anything he wants to do can be done, not only without the disapproval but with the admiration of his fellows, if only it can get itself treated as a Joke. And this temptation can be almost entirely hidden from your patient by that English seriousness about Humour. Any suggestion that there might be too much of it can be represented to him as 'Puritanical' or as betraying a 'lack of humour.'

"But flippancy is the best of all. In the first place it is very economical. Only a clever human can make a real Joke about virtue, or indeed about anything else; any of them can be trained to talk as if virtue were funny. Among flippant people the Joke is always assumed to have been made. No one actually makes it; but every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it. If prolonged, the habit of Flippancy builds up around a man the finest armour-plating against the Enemy that I know, and it is quite free from the dangers inherent in the other sources of laughter. It is a thousand miles away from joy; it deadens, instead of sharpening, the intellect; and it excites no affection between those who practise it,

"Your affectionate uncle
SCREWTAPE"

Of the four kinds of laughter Lewis notes we today are experts in the third and fourth kinds and that is our problem. We laugh at and we laugh off the people, the important matters, ourselves and even God, and the result is a cynical alienation that has summed up so many people of our age: clever but lonely.

Don't settle for it; be as critical of your own laughter as you are of the foolish events and incidents that evoke a laugh.

Happiness (what C. S. Lewis calls Joy) is the cause of the first two kinds of laughter and happiness comes from involvement with people. Let me show you what I mean. Do you remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? I realize that the canon of the New Testament is technically closed, but with your permission allow me to invent a chapter two of that Parable. It is my own creation so take it as such; it goes as follows:

The scene is the inn midway between Jerusalem and Jericho. There is a special dinner underway in one of the dining rooms; a crowd of relatives and friends are present at the party. The man who was left for dead a few days ago is about to speak. It turns out that he is an important business leader in Jerusalem and a member of several civic and government commissions. He speaks in response to a toast. "I am so happy that you all are able to be with me tonight for this celebration. My wife had warned me about going down to Jericho alone, but it was the driver's day off and I decided to make

the trip anyway. I feel so lucky to be alive. I'll tell you, it was an unforgettable experience. The robbers stopped me and took the car, all my money, credit cards. I begged them to let me go but they started to beat me up and I realized that they were going to finish me off so I played dead and finally they left; I'm sure they thought I was dead. I managed to get to the edge of the highway and a car slowed down; it was a clergyman; he looked worried and said something to his driver about going to get the police. A little while later another car slowed and I was encouraged (it had an "E" license). The owner spoke and I recognized the accent--he was from my province. I tried to speak but was too weak now. I remember him saying something about how dangerous the highway was, that I was probably dead already, then he said, 'Drive on.' The next thing I remember is waking up in this inn; there was a doctor at my bed asking me my name and next of kin. And, now, you are all here to celebrate my recovery. Actually, I could have left yesterday but I have a special reason for staying. A Samaritan man brought me in here and even paid a deposit. He said that he would be back here today or tomorrow and I hoped to be able to meet him."

I will end Chapter II right there. A good parable should end without an ending, with questions still unanswered.

But now, let me offer some simple definitions: First a definition of unhappiness:

Unhappiness is three robbers who drop by the inn on that evening, flush with money, sure of themselves and of their perfect crime;

Unhappiness is a very busy and important clergyman who, having finished his assignment at Jericho, is enroute back to Jerusalem and stops by the inn that evening for coffee.

Unhappiness is the government official who was so sure the man struck by thieves was beyond hope. He too stops by the inn for a rest, and he too is unhappy.

Let me give a definition of happiness, equally simple and direct:

Happiness is a certain Samaritan who steps up to the desk and inquires: "I brought a fellow in here the other night and asked you to call a doctor. I was just wondering how everything turned out, and by the way, what do I owe you?"

Graduate of 1969, if you want to be happy, be like him! He is the man for our time.

He is both free and obligated.

He is poised, he reacts well under stress, he is cool. He does not do everything but he does do something. He is not a doctor and is unable to really cure the man he finds in the ditch, but he does have compassion, a little basic first aid knowledge, pours a little wine and olive oil on the

wounds and takes the stranger to a place where he can be more completely helped. Then after a relatively minor delay he pays a P2.00 deposit and goes on to Jericho a few hours late, that all he does.

But, notice one thing more that is of tremendous significance for each of us today. When he stopped to help the victim and became involved with that unfortunate stranger, it is he, the Samaritan, who makes the discovery that all is not lost, that the situation is not hopeless. Wounds always look far worse than they are. This fact fooled the robbers and frightened away the priest and lawyer, but it is the joyous privilege granted to the Samaritan to find out, as he wipes oil and wine on the bloodied man that he was, in fact, going to pull through. "You're going to be OK, friend; here, let me prop you up here on the back seat and get you to the inn down the road." Believe me, this is the man to watch; he is the one who changes things. We have plenty of thugs who swagger around bringing with them their own reign of terror, and plenty of pessimists who hang black crepe paper on everything, so sure that everything is going from bad to worse. "How this highway has deteriorated, peace and order is non-existent out here, I must write a letter to the Manila Times about this terrible incident, poor fellow out there probably dead already. Drive on, Juanito."

Graduate of 1969, decide right now who you are. Ask God for inner strength and motivation, for the courage to react wisely in stress and the buoyancy to wager on hope and not fear.

Be the Samaritan if you dare. He reaches into his pocket to pay the bill and notices the crowd and laughter coming from the special dining room. "Is there a party here tonight?" The desk manager has sent a bell boy to the crowded room with a big smile. He answers: "Yes, there is."