

REDEEMER

R E P O R T

JUNE 2008

THE GOSPEL AND HUMOR

BY TIM KELLER

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 to remind the hearers 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 infinitely costly grace it destroys both our self-righteousness and our need to ridicule others. This is also true of self-directed ridicule. There are some people who constantly, 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 dis-ease 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, shocked by any behavior. We find a lot to laugh at, starting with our own weaknesses. They don't threaten us any more 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 groundnote 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.*" (C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory")

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
(Continued on page 3)



INSIDE:

- THE GOSPEL AND HUMOR... *CONT'D*
- MORE CANCER—
- SR. HIGH MISSION TRIP TO UGANDA
- GET TO KNOW YOUR DEACS
- PAUL TRIPP SPEAKS AT REDEEMER

MORE CANCER—

BY BILL STUNTZ

My cancer has been promoted: I'm officially in stage 4. My doctors have found two cancerous nodules—a euphemism for “small tumors”—one on each of my lungs. I started chemo this week. Next week, I'll see a thoracic surgeon who will, sometime this summer, cut those tumors out. Needless to say, this isn't good news—though, thanks to medical advances (especially, thanks to those evil drug companies that politicians regularly attack), it isn't disastrous news either. We'll see what the future brings.

I don't have any previous experience with this sort of thing, but judging from what I hear and read, I'm supposed to be asking why all this is happening, and why it's happening to me. Honestly, those questions are about the farthest thing from my mind.

Partly, that's because they aren't hard questions. Why does our world have gravity? Why does the sun rise in the East? There are technical answers, but the metaphysical answer is simple: that's how reality works. So too here. Only in the richest parts of the rich world of the twenty-first century could anyone entertain the thought that we should expect long, pain-free lives. Suffering and premature death (an odd phrase: what does it mean to call death “premature”?) are constant presences in the lives of most of the peoples of the Earth, and were routine parts of life for generations of our predecessors in

this country—as they still are today, for those with their eyes open. Stage 4 cancers happen to middle-aged men and women, seemingly out of the blue, because that's how reality works.

As for why this is happening to me in particular, the implicit point of the question is an argument: I deserve better than this. There are two responses. First, I don't—I have no greater moral claim to be free from unwanted pain and loss than anyone else. Plenty of people more virtuous than I am suffer worse than I have, and some who don't seem virtuous at all skate through life with surprising ease. Welcome to the world.

Once again, it seems to me that this claim arises from the incredibly unusual experience of a small class of wealthy professionals in the wealthiest parts of the world today. We think we live in a world governed by merit and moral desert. It isn't so. Luck, fortune, fate, providence—call it what you will, but whatever your preferred label, it has far more to do with the successes of the successful than what any of us deserves. Aristocracies of the past awarded wealth and position based on the accident of birth. Today's meritocracies award wealth and position based on the accident of being in the right place at the right time. The difference is smaller than we tend to think. Once you understand that, it's hard to maintain a sense of grievance in the face of

even the ugliest medical news. I've won more than my share of life's lotteries. It would seem churlish to rail at the unfairness of losing this one—if indeed I do lose it: which I may not.

The second response is simpler; it comes from the movie “Unforgiven.” Gene Hackman is dying, and says to Clint Eastwood: “I don't deserve this. To die like this. I was building a house.” Eastwood responds: “Deserve's got nothing to do with it.”

That gets it right, I think. It's a messed-up world, upside-down as often as it's rightside up. Bad things happen; future plans (that house Hackman was building) come to naught. Deserve's got nothing to do with it.

Why, then, are we so prone to think otherwise? This is one of the biggest reasons I believe my faith is true: something deep within us expects, even demands moral order—in a world that shouts from the rooftops that no such order exists. Any good metaphysical theory must explain both of those phenomena: both the expectation and the lack of supporting evidence for the thing expected. The only persuasive way to get there, I think, is to begin with a world made good that was twisted, corrupted, bent. Buried deep in our hearts are hints of the way things ought to be; the ugliest reality can't snuff them out. Still, that reality exists; it can't be denied. Christianity

(Continued on page 5)

REDEEMER REPORT

Kathy Keller
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The Redeemer Report is a publication of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church.
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HUNTER COLLEGE AUDITORIUM East 69TH (Between Park & Lexington) services at 10:30AM • 6:00PM	ETHICAL CULTURE West 64TH and CPW service at 9:15AM	FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH Corner of West 79TH and Broadway service at 5:00PM & 7:15PM
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SR. HIGH STUDENTS PLAN MISSION TRIP TO UGANDA

BY CREGAN COOKE

This August a team of students and leaders from Redeemer's Senior High Youth Group will travel to Uganda, partnering with the Fount of Mercy organization to help Taost (a school for orphans affected by HIV/AIDS). The school is located in the town of Jinja about an hour's drive outside of Kampala. The team of 12 is made up of 2 guy leaders, 2 girl leaders, and 8 students (4 girls and 4 guys). They will work with the school daily to introduce the love of Christ into the lives of these orphans, by developing relationships, teaching Vacation Bible School, leading activities, and just hanging out.

As is the challenge with any short-term mission trip, we don't want this to be just a "once and done" experience. We hope to build lasting relationships with the

students and the school that we can carry back to our families, our fellow students and their families. We want to begin something meaningful that extends beyond this summer by forming relationships that continue for years into the future through: an adopt/support a student program, creating a partnership between the Redeemer youth group and its families with the school (providing supplies and other needs regularly), and potentially returning to the school again in the years ahead to provide personal help and encouragement.

There are always questions of cost vs. value when raising large amounts of money to travel overseas, and this trip is no different. But there is no better experience for shaping a student's view of life and their understanding of the

relevance of the Gospel than serving in a place where the needs are so great and the resources are so limited. The team needs your prayers and your support. Please consider praying regularly throughout the summer for our team. Pray for the team's preparations, safety and health, and for the students and teachers of Taost we will be serving.

Also consider supporting this team. The amount needed to cover costs of travel, lodging, supplies and vaccinations for the entire team is \$36,000. If you would like to help, you can sign up on June 15 or 22 after church to sponsor one of the youth group students for the team's walk-a-thon fund raiser. Or you can make a donation online: <http://www.redeemer.com/2008ugandateam>

THE GOSPEL AND HUMOR...

(CONT'D FROM PAGE 1)

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, 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 instinctively "live out" the gospel.

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.



Agnes Day appears with the permission of www.agnesday.org

GET TO KNOW YOUR DEACS

The Diaconate, Redeemer's mercy ministry, provides assistance to those in our community with practical, visible needs, while supporting them spiritually. We would like to introduce you to two of our "deacs" (deacons/deaconesses): Laura Fels & Kaleb Chang!

Name of deaconess: **Laura Fels**

Length of time I've attended Redeemer: 19 years

Length of time I've served on the Diaconate: 10 years, at different times

The service I attend: 10:30AM East Side Morning

Hobbies: Studying (in seminary), being outdoors, biking, swimming, travel

The last book I read was: *Ben-Oni: Son of Sorrow* by Agnes Scott Kent

Most people don't know that I: Am a Redeemer fossil, one of the few Redeemerites who was here before its beginning.

I grew up in: Puerto Rico

My New York neighborhood is: Roosevelt Island

I love New York because: I love being a part of what God is doing here.

How the Lord has been preparing me to serve as a deac: Understanding the grace and mercy God showered on me and the burden to minister that grace and mercy to others.

Memorable experiences from my time as a deac:

1) I had the privilege of leading a client to the Lord. 2) Following a membership interview, I had to make a follow up call to discuss an area of concern. Usually people react negatively. Instead, God convicted her with the Scripture I used, and the next time we met, she was humbly repentant, teachable, and grateful for how God has begun working in her life.

Name of deacon: **H. Kaleb Chang**

Length of time I've attended Redeemer: 7 years

Length of time I've served on the Diaconate: 3 years

The service I attend: 10:30AM East Side Morning

Hobbies: Foodie (wines, food), travelling, movies, pen pal-ing, fitness

The last books I read were: *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel; *The Reason for God* by Dr. Timothy Keller; *The Foundations of Screenwriting* by Syd Field; *The Long Way Down* by Nick Hornby

Most people don't know that I: 1) used to row/crew in college; 2) weigh 200 pounds; 3) almost never say no to dark chocolate.

I grew up in: New York City - Queens; you know, the countryside

Besides NY, I've lived in: Buffalo, Boston, South Korea.

The most unique thing that has happened to me in New York City is: One night, I was dressed to the nines at a Lincoln Center gala, the next day I served in a soup kitchen in the Village.

I love New York because: 1) I can get/buy whatever I want, whenever I want it; 2) I can hear ten different languages being spoken before noon; 3) God willing, it's shaping up to be a "City on a Hill"...

How the Lord has been preparing me to serve as a deac: By training my heart and my actions to grow in mercy and service

Memorable experiences from my time as a deac: Praying with people right after worship service is always a privilege. I've had more than a few people returning in the following weeks to share how the times shared in prayer help them in immeasurable ways.

***If you have a financial or other practical need, please call the Diaconate Helpline, (212) 726-1334.
To learn more about the Redeemer Diaconate, visit www.redeemer.com/diaconate***

PAUL TRIPP, AUTHOR AND COUNSELOR, SPEAKS AT REDEEMER JUNE 22

Relationships...A Mess Worth Making

Sunday, June 22 from 1:30PM to 4:30PM

Hunter College Auditorium, East 69th St. between Park & Lexington

Register online at www.redeemer.com/sogf Registration fee: \$20.

Isn't it amazing that none of us has ever had a relationship that hasn't disappointed us in some way? None of us ever gets our dream. Yet loving relationships are at the heart of God's plan for our lives. During this conference, Dr. Paul Tripp will help you understand how God's grace opens the way for a new and better vision for relationships.

Paul Tripp is the president of Paul Tripp Ministries, a non-profit organization, whose mission statement is "Connecting the transforming power of Jesus Christ to everyday life." He is a gifted communicator who has over 15 years of pastoral ministry, is on the pastoral staff of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and also on the adjunct faculties numerous seminaries. He has been a counselor for 25 years. Paul is the author of several books on practical issues of Christian living including *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*. Paul is a sought-after national and international conference speaker. He has been married for 35 years and has four grown children.

MORE CANCER—...

(CONT'D FROM PAGE 2)

sees that reality, recognizes it for what it is—but also sees the expectation, and recognizes where it comes from.

Bottom line: I don't need anyone to tell me why I'm in the situation I'm in, and I certainly don't think I merit an exemption from the rottenness to which the rest of the world is subject.

But I do need to know some things. Three, to be precise: first, that I'm not alone; second, that my disease has not made me ugly to those I love and to the God who made me; and third, that somehow, something good can come from this. My faith tells me that the God of the universe suffered everything I suffer and infinitely worse. Death and suffering don't separate human beings from our Creator—on the contrary: those things unite us with our

Creator. The barrier became the bridge: that is the great miracle of the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Resurrection. So I need never suffer alone. Job's story confirms that, far from rejecting the ugliness of disease and pain, God embraces those who suffer and takes on their suffering. Beauty and ugliness are turned inside-out. Joseph's story and the gospels alike show a God who delights to use the worst things to produce the best things. That doesn't make life's hells less than hellish. But it does make them bearable.

This isn't just whistling in the dark—at least, I hope it isn't. It all makes sense to me: it fits the world I see and feel, with all its shades of glory and misery. And it answers the questions my soul cries out. "Why" isn't one of those questions.

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http://www.law.upenn.edu/blogs/dskeel/archives/2008/04/more_cancerstuntz.html#more

[I'm a law professor—I teach criminal law and criminal procedure at Harvard—and also an evangelical Christian. That puts [me] in a pretty small, and maybe pretty weird, demographic. I'm also a political junkie and a registered Republican, though I've cast as many Democratic votes as Republican ones. I'm interested in all those things—law and legal theory, crime and criminal justice, everything about American politics and political culture, the culture of evangelical Protestantism, and the intersections of various items on that list.]
From: <http://www.law.upenn.edu/blogs/dskeel/archives/2008/02/welcome.html>



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CHRISTIAN BOOKS FOR SUMMER READING — PICKS BY TIM KELLER

On the Bible:

Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 2nd edition, 2008.)

This makes the case that the Biblical account of Jesus is not legend but historically trustworthy. Blomberg incorporates insights from Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, an important work but much longer and more difficult to read.

On the Cross:

J.I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Crossway, 2007.)

This volume assembles several older essays by J.I. Packer. They are classics and had a profound influence on my understanding of Jesus' death.

John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 2006)

This volume along with the Packer book will give you a complete and Biblically rich understanding of the Cross.

On Faith and Culture:

Andy Crouch, *Culture-Making: Recovering our Creative Calling* (IVP, 2008)

This is coming out during the summer, so order it and read it before Labor Day. It's one of the best books yet on how Christians can integrate their faith with their work.

Philip Bess, *Till We Have Built Jerusalem* (ISI Books, 2006.)

This is a fascinating set of essays by a Christian architect laying out a Christian vision for a 'new urbanism,' the belief and practice that cities are the best social arrangement for human flourishing. Bess is the Director of Graduate Studies at the Notre Dame School of Architecture.

On the Resurrection:

N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (HarperOne, 2008)

It's always a little dangerous to recommend a book I haven't read yet, but I suggest it because it is basically a shorter and more accessible summary of his bigger classic *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, which is wonderful but very long and academic.

On Church History:

Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Baker, 2001, 2nd ed)

This is maybe the best, short, most accessible overview of Christian history available. It doesn't try to survey every century, but chooses 10 major turning points (the split between the eastern and western church, the Reformation, the Great Awakening, etc.).

Devotional:

John Newton, *The Letters of John Newton* or *Cardiphonia: The Utterance of the Heart* (various ed.)

Either of these editions of John Newton's letters are classics of spirituality and devotion. He was the former slave trader who was converted and became a minister and who wrote the hymn 'Amazing Grace.'

General:

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper, 1952)

You may not want to admit (around Redeemer) that you have never read this book—so stop being a hypocrite and read it! And if you have already read it, read one of the other big CSL classics: *The Screwtape Letters* or *The Great Divorce* or even *The Narnia Chronicles*.

For fiction picks by Kathy Keller and family & kid picks by Brent Bounds, check our website: www.redeemer.com