



Jesus never laughed?

Jesus Never Laughed, or so the pamphlet said. An adolescent boy at the time, I found myself laughing at every little thing—too often during church services. Reading that pamphlet I wondered, *So he never laughed? What was wrong with him?*

SAMUEL LAMERSON

Perhaps we're accustomed to only thinking of Jesus as "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief" (Isa 53:3). His crucifixion is certainly no laughing matter. Or maybe the image of a laughing Jesus offends simply because it makes Him *too* human. Yet Heb 4:15 tells us that Jesus is able to sympathize with us because He is exactly like us (minus the sinning). God has gifted us with a sense of humor; it stands to reason that Jesus had one too.

Now, every culture has its own idea of what is funny: Watch a random selection of German, Spanish or Japanese comedy shows and sometimes you'll be rolling on the floor, and other times scratching your head. Why is *that* funny? First century Palestine would be no different: It had its own comedic tradition, steeped in the cutting irony of the Old Testament (Job, Jonah or Ezekiel) and the over-the-top parodies of classical Greece (Aristophanes).

Aristotle famously wrote that comedies end with a wedding. That may be so, but the gas that really fuels the fire of Greek comedy is *exaggeration*: Take a simple gag and blow it out of all proportion. Re-read some of Jesus' sayings with this in mind and you might find a chuckle or two yourself: Your neighbor may have a speck in

his eye, but you've got a *log*. The blind are leading the blind—*right into a hole in the ground*. A priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan are walking down the road ...

Not Exactly the "A"-List

In the parable of the wedding feast (Matt 22:1–10), the king throws a wedding feast in his son's honor. It's the social event of the year. Servants are dispatched carrying invitations to all the VIPs. The powerful. The socially connected. The "in" crowd. The kind of people who know how to dress and how to act at a royal banquet.

But the glitterati—the Pharisees with their clean robes and punctilious manners, the scribes with their jots and tittles all in a row—simply can't be bothered to attend.

What's a king to do? Fed up with those who think they're too good to come, he decides to invite those who know they aren't. He sends his servants out to round up the religiously and politically incorrect. The powerless. The socially disenfranchised. The "out" crowd. The kind of people who hang out on the street late at night.

Imagine a royal wedding feast filled with homeless people. Scandalous! This is a comedic break in expectation, exaggerated to drive the



punchline home: The outsiders have become the insiders. If you're one of the insiders, the joke's on you.

I'll Gladly Pay You Tuesday ...

The parable of the unforgiving debtor (Matt 18:23–35) makes use of what comics today call the *topper* or *call-back*. While the audience is still laughing at the last line, you hit them again.

Imagine a slave who owes the king some money. Make that a *lot* of money. Ten thousand talents, even. We may not get the joke, but Jesus' listeners would have: That's more money than the Roman Government had! It's as if your freshman daughter had called up to say she'd run a little money up on the credit card you gave her. How much? The national debt.

Better yet, when the man is called to pay, he says, "Give me a little more time and I will pay all" (18:26). This is like the girl telling her father that she "plans to get a job at Christmas" to pay off that maxed-out credit card. What's a king to do? Instead of laughing the slave out of his court (or into prison), he *simply forgives the debt*. She calls the credit card company and whines a little, so they let her off the hook. Just like that.

Then the topper: The slave leaves and finds someone who owes him a hundred *denarii*—a few months' wages. Not only does he demand the money, he *chokes* the poor guy. That goes beyond merely uncharitable; it's downright cruel. One might even say comically so. In the end, the unjust slave gets his comeuppance, tossed in jail until he can pay in full, which he never can.

Here, Jesus lays one exaggeration on top of another until the audience can't help but see how utterly ridiculous it is to hold a ten-dollar grudge against a neighbor when God, the gracious king, has wiped clean a fortune's worth of sin.

The Divine Comedy

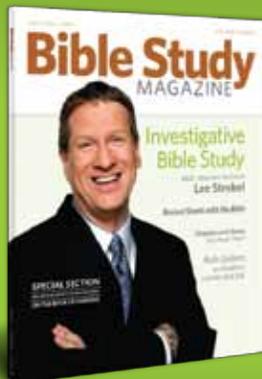
By Aristotle's rule of thumb, God's plan for the ages is a comedy, because no matter how tragic this world may seem, it ends with a wedding (Rev 19:6–10). He has chosen for himself a bride made of people who don't dress or act properly—drug dealers, prostitutes, and even a few recovering Pharisees—former sinners all. Snubbed by the people the world counts as important, God spends His incredible riches on the unwashed masses instead, inviting them to join Him in an exquisite meal. And, one would like to think, more than a few good laughs. 



Samuel Lamerson is Dean of Faculty and Associate Professor of New Testament

at Knox Seminary in Fort Lauderdale. In a former life he was a comic magician and juggler, appearing for IBM, McDonalds and the Nickelodeon network.

“Jesus lays one exaggeration on top of another.”



Renew your subscription to
Bible Study Magazine
for almost 50% off the cover price!

Renew now for only \$14.95!

Call 800.875.6467 or visit www.BibleStudyMagazine.com for more information.



Subscribe Now!
www.BibleStudyMagazine.com | 44