



**What happens when you mix the Bible with teenagers and humor?
The results may not only be surprising...but biblical!**

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way Through the Bible:

Using Humor with Youth

By Cuyler Black



I could provide a lot of evidence for God having a sense of humor, but maybe the best proof of all is something you youth workers are already well aware of. It's this: Can you imagine effectively building relationships with children and teens as a youth worker without a sense of humor? Impossible, right? You know it can't be done. Therefore, it's got to be a gift from God. Case closed. I should really end the article right here, but then the person who recruited me to write this article might think I'm lazy. She'd say, "You're very handsome, but you're also lazy." That's what I think she'd say.

I grew up in a house with a lot of laughter. That's gonna happen when your mother is a musical comedy actress. But it also happened because my father, who is a minister, believes in a God

who is supremely a God of joy. My parents live that out every day. Between the two of them, I didn't stand a chance of growing up to be one of those humorless customs officers at border crossings. Ever try to make one of them laugh? I don't recommend it. The ensuing full-body cavity search is not worth it.

Anyway, I got my start in youth ministry as a counselor at a summer church camp where the motto of the staff was "God is relevant and God is fun." We did everything we could to reveal to the young campers a Jesus who loves them and has a wonderful plan for them. And then we'd play ridiculous games involving rubber chickens. The camps were always full of laughter. Kids began to see that joyfulness, lightheartedness, and positive humor were meant to be compatible with—indeed,

representative of—the Christian life. God is relevant and God is fun. This two-pronged approach was life-changing for many youth. They saw what it could mean to follow Jesus in a whole new way.

You know this two-pronged approach already, don't you? You know how to blend humor into your ministries and you do it well, I'm sure. But have you ever done a lesson that directly shines a light on Jesus' sense of humor? As youth workers, we rightly emphasize his compassion, his humility, his sacrificial love, his teaching and preaching, his miracles...but

what about his humor? There's something universally acknowledged as life-affirming and attractive about mirthful people. We like to be around people who can make us laugh or who laugh easily themselves. Could a lesson on Jesus' sense of humor draw some kids closer to him by making him more real, more human, more approachable?

There's only space here to give a few bullet-point examples of what I'm talking about, but you'll come up with others yourself. And let's not forget the Old Testament either, because if Jesus is God incarnate, then we ought to see some humor from the very beginning. Genesis, in fact...

- Have youth come up with examples of some of God's creatures that they think look funny or act in humorous ways, like the platypus, the monkey, the penguin, and others. God appears to delight in creating very odd-looking and whimsically-behaving animals (from a human perspective).
- The birth of Isaac (whose name means "he laughs") causes Sarah to exclaim, "God has brought me laughter" (Gen. 21:6). Earlier, in chapters 17 and 18, both Abraham and Sarah laugh merrily at the prophecy that they will be parents. Each of them displays a lively sense of humor, and this is the couple with whom God chooses to establish his new covenant. In no other episode in the Bible do the words "laugh" or "laughter" appear so often together—seven times!

- Numbers 22: The story of Balaam and his talking donkey is hilarious. Déjà vu, Shrek.
- 1 Kings 18: God and Elijah have a little fun with some false prophets on a mountain top.
- A playful person gives others nicknames. Jesus called Simon "the Rock." Why did he do this? He also called the brothers James and John "Sons of Thunder." Again, why? Have the kids conjecture.
- Jesus often wrapped his truths in comically exaggerated images: a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle (Matt. 19:24), a judgmental person walking around with a plank in his eye (Matt. 7: 1-5), wolves dressed up like sheep (Matt. 7:15).
- Jesus told stories involving humorous characters, like the judge harried by the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-5) and the self-righteous Pharisee praying at the temple (Luke 18: 9-14).
- Jesus enjoyed the company of children (Matt. 18:2; 19:13-15), which one would not if devoid of a sense of humor.
- Jesus has fun with a coin in a fish (Matt. 17: 24-27). For what other reason than being playful with his disciples would he pay his taxes this way?
- While the disciples are at sea battling a storm, Jesus wanders out on foot and acts as though he means to pass them by (Mark 6: 45-50). Could he be waiting for them to notice so he could say, "Oh, hi, guys. Having some trouble?" Again, is he having some fun here? I think so.
- Numerous times Jesus describes himself as a bridegroom and heaven as

being like a wedding banquet (Matt. 9:15; 22:1-14; 25: 1-13). Ever been to a wedding where there wasn't joy and laughter?

And there are numerous other examples that you or your youth group kids may find on your own. Of course, Jesus went through many dark, serious, and sorrowful times, culminating with his awful death on a cross. But what carried him through? The writer of Hebrews says it was "the joy set before him" (Heb. 12:2), the knowledge that all pain, suffering, sadness, loneliness, and death would someday pass away, leaving only eternal things: love, joy, and peace. And where those things abide, there is laughter. Lots of it. Maybe even some rubber chickens.

So love those kids, laugh with them, and give them a fresh perspective on the God who longs to put a smile on their faith.

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