

No man spoke the way this man does: The place of humour in Jesus' teachings

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Jesus was undoubtedly an interesting speaker. Large crowds followed him, sometimes travelling long distances and going without food so they would not miss a word. His audience was impressed by the way in which He taught, as well as by His message and His unique personality. The reason He drew large crowds was a combination of *what* He taught, *who* He was, and *how* He taught. This paper will look at how Jesus used humour as part of delivering the most powerful message every taught.

Every culture has a unique style of humour. It's very difficult to translate a joke from one language into another - something is almost always 'lost' in the translation and it rarely sounds as funny once it's been translated. But even with people speaking the same language, cultural differences between communities affect our sense of humour. For example, Australians have a particular style of humour which is often not understood by Americans, even though both countries speak English. Our sense of humour, and the kinds of things we find funny, are affected by our cultural background, our history, our politics and religion, the kind of food we eat, popular personalities, the climate, and many other factors.

As a result, we may miss the humour in Jesus' words if we do not understand the characteristics of first century Jewish humour. Here are some of these characteristics which are noticeable in Jesus' teachings, with examples of each:

1. EXAGGERATION

Not all exaggeration is humorous, but exaggeration is a common feature of Jesus' humour. There are two types of exaggeration:

A. Overstatement - overstating something in order to forcefully bring home a truth. An example of this (although not necessarily humorous) would be in Matthew 5:29-30 "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away ... and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away". If Jesus' words were taken *literally* we would expect to see a lot of one-eyed, one-handed Christians! However, we easily

recognise this as an overstatement - a graphic example of how we should do *whatever it takes* to avoid sin.

Another example of overstatement (again, not humorous) is in Luke 14:26 "If any one comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters - yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple". Jesus is not saying we must hate the people who are closest to us, but rather, he is *overstating* a position in order to make a point forcefully. The point He is making is that compared with the **love** that we must have for Him in order to be His disciple, any other expression of love, by contrast, is "*hatred*". It's another way of forcefully saying that we must love Him immeasurably more than any other person we love, to the extent that our love for Him is enormously greater than the greatest love we have ever experienced before, or can comprehend.

B. Hyperbole - this is a *gross* exaggeration - an exaggeration to the point of unreality. These are so obviously exaggerations that we would never think of taking them literally. This type of exaggeration is common to Jewish humour of the first century, and occurs frequently in Jesus' teachings. We can imagine Jesus' listeners laughing loudly as He used this exaggeration, especially if he also "acted out" what He was describing. Here are a few examples:

"You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel". (Matthew 23:24).

I can imagine Jesus going through the motions of imitating someone who would carefully strain their water through a fine

cloth so they didn't inadvertently swallow a tiny insect which would be an "unclean" food under the Jewish law. He might then have opened his mouth wide and pretended to swallow something huge, perhaps coughing or gagging on it as He did. His point would have been obvious, and His audience would have understood the joke immediately. Some people were making a huge fuss about little things, but completely missing the really important things. There would be no better way of illustrating this than with an example which used a gross exaggeration and would have made them laugh at the same time. The point was obvious, and many people would have realised their own silliness while laughing at themselves.

While we're talking about camels, you'll probably remember Jesus words "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). This is such a *gross* exaggeration that many commentators have questioned whether Jesus really said this. Some have suggested that the word for "camel" and the word for "rope" are similar in the language spoken by Jesus, and He might have actually said "it's easier for a **rope** to go through the eye of a needle ..." Others have suggested that "the eye of the needle" was a small door in one of the gates of Jerusalem, and for a camel to get through it's driver had to remove all it's packs and the camel had to crawl through on it's knees. These are interesting ideas, but they miss the point that Jesus is using a gross exaggeration to make the point that for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God is really, really, really, really difficult! In fact, Jesus goes on to say it's **impossible!** "Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man **this is impossible**, but with God all things are possible'" (verse 26). We should make sure we read those last words: "BUT with God ALL THINGS are possible". The point of the "unreal" exaggeration is that God can do the impossible! He can even save rich people!

One of my favourite examples of Jesus' humour is His story in Matthew 7:3

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention

to the plank in your own eye?"

The *hyperbole* (or gross exaggeration) in this story is having a "plank" of wood in your eye. Jesus is contrasting a tiny speck of dust with a huge splinter. A speck of dust in the eye is an irritation, but a huge splinter would cause blindness. We might be able to carry on with our work with a speck of dust in our eye, and it would possibly go unnoticed, but a huge splinter would be so obvious and it would cause pain and blindness and bring whatever we are doing to a complete stop. By contrasting these two situations Jesus teaches something very important.

Imagine if you had a speck of sawdust in your eye and someone who was blinded by a huge splinter in their own eye offered to help! Your eyes are such sensitive and important parts of the body that the only person you would want to go near your eye would be someone who was experienced, sensitive and extremely careful. Again, Jesus might have acted this out or used gestures to demonstrate the absurdity of a blind person trying to help with a delicate and sensitive operation like getting a speck of dust out of someone's eye. No doubt the audience would have laughed, and seen the point immediately. We are all blinded by something - perhaps by prejudice, pride or ignorance - yet we are eager to offer advice to other people about sensitive matters. We rush in to "help" in situations where our advice is more damaging than helpful, and we create bigger problems than the ones we are offering to solve. What a clever way this was for Jesus to get that message across. In laughing at ourselves we are more open to receiving the truth and to being gently guided to a better way.

With this small humorous example Jesus taught many lessons. He taught us that we should not neglect our own problems, because left "untreated" our faults will lead to further damage for ourselves and others. He taught us whenever we notice a tiny fault with someone else it might be because we have grown insensitive to our own major faults. And He reminds us how stupid we look to other people when we start to criticise.

You might be able to think of other

examples like this, such as “the blind leading the blind” (Matthew 15:14).

2. UNUSUAL OR UNREAL STORY-LINE

An unusual or unreal story-line is an indication that humour may be involved. The whole story may not necessarily be humorous, but Jesus may have used an element of humour in order to direct our attention to the main point. It’s a way of saying “Don’t pay too much attention to the **details** of this story - after all, it’s just a story - because I want you to get the **main point.**”

Remember the story of the ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13)? Five were wise, and five were foolish. The five wise ones were well prepared for the wedding, but the unwise ones were unprepared and were not allowed to attend the wedding banquet.

Did you notice anything unusual or “unreal” about the story? In Jesus’ day, weddings were a major event which lasted several days, just as it still is today in many cultures. The wedding was planned to the smallest detail and the planning was done for months or years ahead. Every one involved in the wedding knew their role and what they had to do. Part of the traditional first century Jewish wedding was a procession at night when the bridal party went to meet the groom. The bridesmaids carried torches for lighting the way and the torches were used as a feature in a “fire dance”. This was a traditional part of every wedding, and the bridesmaids would have learned and practised the dances well in advance. It was an important part of the celebrations and it’s inconceivable that some detail of it would have been overlooked or forgotten.

Which is exactly the point Jesus is making. Imagine a wedding where the bride “forgot” to purchase flowers, or a bridal dress. Or the parents “forgot” to arrange the wedding banquet. Or the groom “forgot” to purchase rings. It’s so extremely unlikely that if a story began that way we would immediately expect it to be a joke. So it is with this story by Jesus. His audience would immediately have recognised that it was not a true story - that it was a kind of ‘joke’ - a funny

story with a punch line. Like all funny stories they would have listened intently, waiting for the punch line. That punch line came in the words in verse 13 “keep watch”, or “be prepared”. This is the whole point of the story. In other words, Jesus is saying “you wouldn’t dream of being part of a wedding without being prepared. Something as important as a wedding takes a great deal of preparation, and you would pay attention to every detail to make sure everything went as it should. How much **more** should you be prepared for the coming of the kingdom of heaven - especially since you do not know the time.”

By making this important point as part of a humorous story Jesus is making sure His audience really gets the point. Humour has a way of relaxing us and “softening” us for the punch line. So Jesus tells a funny story about some bridesmaids who were not prepared as they should have been and then hits us with His point: “so, be prepared!”

Many commentators interpret Jesus’ stories by giving every detail a hidden or “spiritual” meaning. For example, in this story the oil would be a symbol of something in the Christian life (some suggest the Word, others the Spirit). The wise bridesmaids would symbolise faithful Christians and the foolish ones represent Christians who do not have enough of the Word or the Spirit. And so on. However, if we interpret Jesus’ stories this way (i.e. as allegories, with every detail representing something else) then we invariably come against problems. Let’s analyse this allegorical interpretation. Let’s say the oil represents the Word, and at the second coming of Christ (the coming of the bridegroom) some Christians discover they don’t have enough of “the Word”. If this was an allegory about the second coming and the Judgment, how would these unprepared Christians realise they had too little of the Word? By the time they realised it, wouldn’t it be too late to do anything, or go anywhere? So, what does the story mean when they went away to buy some oil? Where could they go? It simply doesn’t fit with what we learn elsewhere about the second coming. Even more disturbing is the attitude of the “wise” bridesmaids. Wouldn’t a faithful

Christian want to do absolutely everything within their ability to help their fellow-Christians get as much of the Word as they could? "No," they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'" Is this a Christian attitude? Do you think Jesus would be **commending** an attitude that says "I'm well prepared myself - I've been reading and studying my Bible for a long time - but I'm not going to lift a finger to help you, you'll have to go somewhere else"? And how could any Christian say "there is not enough" of the Word (or the Spirit) to go around!?

If we attempt to explain this story by making every detail represent something else we'll end up with many difficulties. On the other hand, if we see this as a story with just **one main point** ("Be prepared!") and we recognise the story as being an obvious example of some people who were unprepared in a situation where a great deal of planning was normal, then we can see that Jesus was using an "unreal" situation to make his point in much the same way as He used *exaggeration* - even impossible exaggeration - to make a point on other occasions.

I expect His audience would have seen the funny side; they would have laughed, and then they would have been able to understand the lesson and apply it to themselves.

Whenever we are faced with a story of Jesus that is difficult to understand, or if people offer a complicated explanation to tell us what it "really" means, we should ask ourselves these questions:

- (a) does the story contain some elements or details which seem "unreal" or unusual?
- (b) is there some exaggeration here?
- (c) is there **one** main point to this story?
- (d) could Jesus be using humour to make this point?

The following stories may also be examples of how Jesus used humour.

Luke 16:1-15 The story of the shrewd manager (or "unjust steward"). It appears that Jesus is commending dishonesty, (e.g. in verse 8 we read "The master commended the dishonest manager ...") which is extremely unlikely. Is there some humour in this story?

Luke 10:30-37 The story of the good Samaritan. This story includes the "unlikely" detail that a complete stranger not only helps someone in need but is extravagantly generous at the same time. Is there some exaggeration here? If so, what is Jesus' point?

Matthew 13:1-9 The story of the sower. The farmer in this story seems almost careless in the way he scatters his precious seeds in places where it cannot grow. If this is exaggeration, what would be the point?

3. PUNCH LINE

I've used the term "punch line" a number of times already. It usually means the last line of a joke, the one that really makes us laugh. Without the punch line the joke makes no sense.

Jesus used "punch lines" in a similar way, but with some important differences. In His stories the final line is not the humorous one, but it almost always is the main point. The humour frequently comes earlier - and then the final line will be a serious and hard-hitting point. If we're not sure what the point of a story is, we should go to the last line.

Another feature of Jesus' stories is that there will often be an unexpected twist, usually near the end. This tends to catch the listener off-guard, and just when they think they know how the story will end there is a sudden "twist". By catching the listener off-guard Jesus prepares them for the punch line. The story of the lost ("prodigal") son is a good example (Luke 15:11-32).

In this story Jesus describes a young man who is greedy, shows no loyalty or respect to his father, and is impatient and possibly immoral. Jesus contrasts him with his hardworking and loyal brother. As people listened to this they would probably have

thought the younger son was worthless, a good-for-nothing who deserved what he got. But then there is a twist. When he went home and his father accepted him back so readily and enthusiastically, Jesus' listeners might have been shocked that the father was acting so irresponsibly. Then the older son comes into the story and reminds us how he has been loyal, hardworking, obedient and trustworthy. We might expect that he was about to get a commendation from Jesus! After all, aren't these all good characteristics? But the hard-working, loyal, responsible son is the one who is criticised in the end, and the one who wasted his father's money on wild living is the one who is rewarded! Finally we get the explanation for the unexplained twist: "We had to celebrate, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The humour here is that *we*, the listeners, have been caught out. As responsible, hardworking people we identified with the older son and were critical of the younger irresponsible son. If we graciously accept the point in this story about having a

generous spirit and being gracious, then we will realise our mistake and laugh it off.

In the next chapter (Luke 16:1-15) the story of the dishonest manager contains a similar twist. Just when we expect him to be criticised for his dishonesty we read "the master **commended** the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." By now we should have realised that Jesus does not always tell His stories to give us examples of how to behave as Christians (for example, the "wise" bridesmaids were not at all generous, and the shrewd manager was dishonest). Rather, he uses unusual stories to make one main point. The explanation follows immediately after this twist: "the people **of this world** are more shrewd in dealing with **their own kind** ... use **worldly** wealth ..." So, this story is not really a lesson in how Christians should behave in a similar situation, but rather, it leads on to a lesson about being trustworthy. The point Jesus makes about trustworthiness is really the **opposite** of the person in the example He used.

SUMMARY

The main reasons for humour in Jesus' teaching are:

1. It is **memorable**. We usually remember any story which made us laugh.
2. It is **interesting** and maintains **audience involvement**. Because of the nature of humour it tends to keep the attention of the listener and keeps them 'involved', especially if waiting for a 'punch line'.
3. It helps to focus on **one main point**.
4. The listener is 'caught out' and therefore **more receptive** to the lesson.
5. It encourages a **response**. If we laugh at ourselves we're more likely to see the application to our own lives.