

Laughing at Jesus
Matthew 9:18-26

G.K. Chesterton wrote a series of mysteries called *The Father Brown Stories*. Father Brown was something of a Sherlock Holmes figure that solved all sorts of crimes that nobody else could solve. Toward the end of his career, Father Brown was asked by some friends “the secret to his many successes in solving crimes.”

Blinking his big expressionless eyes behind the little round glasses, he blandly replies, “You see, it was I who killed all those people.” Everyone gasps staring with appalled astonishment at the timid mousy priest. Then he goes on, “I had thought out exactly how a thing like that could be done, and in what style or state of mind a man could really do it. And when I was quite sure that I felt exactly like the murderer himself, of course I knew who he was.” (*Eat this Book*, Eugene Peterson, p. 102)

That’s a good depiction of how we should read the Bible – especially the gospels and other narratives. Instead of reading the Scriptures in a detached, clinical way, we should enter into the plot/story and try to think and feel like the people who are being described. In this way we put ourselves in a position to hear God say to us the same things that He said to people thousands of years ago.

Today we are going to attempt to read Matthew 9:18-26 in this fashion, allowing God to scrutinize our hearts and minds. We are between series: we have finished 1 Corinthians and we won’t begin another extended series until August. This morning I have the opportunity to do something that I don’t often get to do, namely preach a passage of Scripture just because it captured my imagination. One phrase in particular captured my imagination. As we’ll see, a group of people actually laughed at Jesus when He told them what was going to happen. This encounter makes me wonder whether there are times when we, in effect, laugh at Jesus in our day.

Let’s pick up the narrative in verse 18:

18 While He was saying these things to them, a synagogue official came and bowed down before Him, and said, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live." 19 Jesus got up and began to follow him, and so did His disciples.

Whereas there was only one temple (in Jerusalem), there were synagogues in over a hundred cities and towns all over Palestine. Synagogues were a place for Jews to gather for prayer and worship. Each synagogue was led by a group of elders; the head elder was the “ruler” of the synagogue. The man who came to Jesus (verse 18) was the ruler of the synagogue in Capernaum.

The parallel accounts in Mark and Luke emphasize different details of the event, but Matthew emphasizes this man’s reverence for and faith in Jesus. He “bowed down before Him” – an expression of reverence and deference. He said, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” This man actually believed that Jesus had the ability to bring his daughter back from the dead. He believed that if Jesus laid His hand on her, she would live again. In response to this faith, Jesus began to follow him back to his house, disciples in

tow.

Let's climb into this scene. What is your greatest point of need right now? If Jesus were standing right here right now, what issue would you bring before Him? What issue is so pressing that you wouldn't care what others thought – you'd fall on your face before Him and cry out, "Jesus, here's my need and You're my only hope"? Perhaps there's some relationship that has you in turmoil. Perhaps you're battling some sin or some temptation that could absolutely "do you in." Perhaps you have financial/material needs; you're working hard but things are tough.

Maybe you don't have anything quite so pressing. The question for you is, "What do you really want?" Not, "What do think you *ought to* want?" What do you really want? There's no reason to bluff with Jesus. He can see right through us. If you were going to be honest, what request would you bring to Jesus?

As you keep in mind the issue you'd bring to Jesus, notice what happened along the way:

20 And a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; 21 for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch His garment, I will get well."

We can probably detect a bit of superstition in this woman's thinking. Whereas the synagogue official believed that Jesus could intentionally heal with a touch, this woman believed that the power would flow from his garments. She had exhausted her medical options, and so she came to Jesus to try to touch the "fringe of His cloak." There are times when superstition can work its way into our approach to Jesus. We can become so self-conscious and insecure that we think, "If I don't pray exactly the right prayer in exactly the right words, God might not give me what I need." When Jesus taught about prayer He said that the Father knows our needs before we ask; so we simply need to ask.

We see both the tenderness and the strength in Jesus' comments to her:

22 But Jesus turning and seeing her said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." At once the woman was made well.

Jesus calls this woman – who most likely was older than Him – daughter, a very endearing way of addressing her. Then He says, "Take courage"; instead of being timid and fearful, she should be full of courage. Then He says, "Your faith has made you well." Even if there was a bit of superstition involved, Jesus saw her faith when she reached out and touched the fringe on His cloak. She believed in Jesus' power and authority even over her malady. "At once the woman was made well."

What a wonderful assurance this encounter gives us. You've probably noticed this, but Jesus doesn't demand that we "get everything right" before He'll have anything to do with us. If that were the case we'd all be in for a long wait. That's no excuse for not seeking God and understanding everything we possibly can about our relationship with God. But Jesus is mainly looking for faith. You can't read the Gospels without concluding that Jesus is looking for faith: "Where is your faith?" "Your faith has made you well." "When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith on the earth?" Jesus is looking for faith. A very small amount of faith is virtuous.

Notice what happened when Jesus finally got to the house of the synagogue official:

23 When Jesus came into the official's house, and saw the flute-players and the crowd in noisy disorder, 24 He said, "Leave; for the girl has not died, but is asleep." And they began laughing at Him.

In Jesus' day a Jewish wake was a noisy affair. People were actually required to hire at least two flute players and a professional "wailer" – a woman who would audibly cry and weep and mourn (Blomberg, p. 161). Jesus came to the official's house in the midst of such "noisy disorder" – which signified that the girl had already died. His comment was, "Leave; for the girl has not died, but is asleep." Mourning and disorder weren't appropriate given that her "death," in effect, was only temporary. Like a person who wakes from a deep sleep, this little girl would come back to life.

The crowd understood what Jesus was saying. Matthew records their response: "And they began laughing at Him." You laugh to mock someone. They were mocking Jesus for the idea that the little girl would "wake up" and come back to life. They knew about life and death and Jesus didn't. What kind of fool would say "the girl has not died, but is asleep"? They expressed their ridicule by "laughing at Jesus."

Jesus apparently didn't come back at them with words. He simply sent them out of the house and did what He had come to do:

25 But when the crowd had been sent out, He entered and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. 26 This news spread throughout all that land.

If this passage illustrates anything, it illustrates that *maybe it's not such a good idea to laugh at Jesus*. When we think that He is naïve or uninformed or hopelessly unrealistic, maybe we should believe Him anyway. That's really Matthew's larger point. He is showing in a dozen different ways (e.g., through His teachings, His miracles, His authority, etc.) that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the One who will bring the Kingdom of God to earth. Ultimately Jesus would be vindicated by being raised from the dead. Therefore, maybe it's not such a good idea to laugh at Jesus. Maybe the proper response is *faith*.

This is the lesson that God has been teaching me lately. I find myself in situations where I have two basic options. I can either take Jesus seriously or I can, in effect, laugh at Him. I can either trust Him like the synagogue official and the woman who touched the hem of His robe or I can dismiss Jesus like the crowd did.

For example, I'm reading through the gospel of Luke in my time with the Lord. A while back I read this in Luke 11:

11 "Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? 12 "Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? 13 "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

The point is rather obvious, isn't it? God is at least as compassionate and generous to me as I am to my children. Therefore, I can ask Him to do things for me. I can even ask Him for more of the Holy Spirit! He's not stingy and reluctant to give me something that's obviously good for me. If He doesn't give something that I think is good for me I can assume that it's not a lack of compassion and it's not that He's not paying attention. In other words, God can be trusted.

I was agonizing about a relationship not too long ago. I was thinking about it; I was strategizing about conversations I might have; I was worrying about it. I was doing everything but asking my Father in heaven to give me a good gift in this relationship. To be honest, I had to stop and think about whether or not I really wanted to ask God to come through.

When you know somebody for a long time, you can anticipate how they'll respond; you've got them figured out and there's little chance that things will be different. In effect, I was patting Jesus on the head, saying, "I appreciate the inspiring illustration about God being a good Father, but You just don't understand this relationship. Jesus, I understand human nature. I understand what is and isn't going to happen here."

Not wanting to be like the crowd that laughed at Jesus, I screwed up the courage to talk to God about this relationship. Strange, isn't it, that I'd need so much urging to my heavenly Father. I don't want to share too much here, but let me just say that it was really, really good. God confirmed that it's not such a good idea to laugh at Jesus. After all, He's the Messiah who came to bring the Kingdom of God. In other words, He came so that God might reign more fully in my life and in my world. When I actually believe that Jesus came so that I might experience the Kingdom more fully, I am exercising the type of faith that Jesus notices.

John Stott makes the comment that "Teacher and Lord were no mere courtesy titles" (*Authentic Christianity*, p. 39). When people called Jesus "Teacher" He expected them to learn from Him. When people called His "Lord" He expected them to obey Him. He had that much wisdom and that much authority (John 13:13). And He has that much authority.

Earlier I asked you what issue you'd bring to Jesus if He were standing here in front of you. Jesus isn't physically standing in front of you, but the reality is that Jesus is actually here with us. If you're a believer in Him, Jesus is with you wherever you go. Jesus said to His disciples, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." He promised that He would come to us and dwell within us through the Holy Spirit. The reality is that Jesus is with us. He hasn't abandoned us in this life.

This means that if we listen, Jesus will speak to us – even on this issue that is most pressing in our lives. Quite often this happens as we enter into the plot of the Scriptures and into specific passages of Scripture. He will say the same type of things to us that He said to the synagogue official, to the woman who touched His robe, to the woman caught in adultery, to the leper, to Peter, to the Pharisees, etc. When Jesus speaks, maybe it's not such a good idea to laugh at Him. May God give us the grace to believe!