

You've Got to Laugh a Little!

Dear Allen,

I've always taken life seriously. When I gave my heart to Jesus at age 10, I sought to live a life pleasing to God. The church elders who provided my mentoring helped me to understand that you can't play with Christianity. However, they didn't teach me that Christians can also laugh.

We talk so much about the joy of the Lord being our strength. Joy helps us transcend emotional distress and worries. We don't understand how God's joy works, but it releases us from all that binds us spiritually, emotionally and mentally. It is good to experience God's joy. It is good to appreciate laughter, and to learn how to incorporate it into our ministries.

This value I learned early in my church service.

The third week of my first pastorate, I rushed to get to church on time. I had been preaching timeliness to the congregation and believed pastors should set the example. My church is located on a road with a posted 30 miles-per-hour speed limit. Handling last minute telephone calls at home made it impossible for me to arrive on time for church school, so I drove over the speed limit to make up time (unwise choice).

I was only five minutes late when I turned onto the road leading to the church, at a speed that exceeded the legal limit, and was caught in a speed trap. I tried to explain to the officer that I was the new pastor of the little church down

the road who was trying to get to church on time, but his only response was, *that is no excuse*. While he ran my license and tags, I could see members drive by on their way to church. I groaned in my spirit because I was embarrassed and felt that somebody might try to use it to my disadvantage. With a ticket in hand and prayer for God's help, I continued my drive to the church. When I turned into the lot, the Lord gave me a new opening for that day's sermon: *A Second Chance*.

At the appropriate time, I started off—*At some time in our lives we all need a second chance. Even pastors who violate the speed limit on the way to church need a second chance*. It initiated smiles and laughs from both pastor and congregation, and it helped me to learn the importance of being able to laugh at oneself.

I wish I could say this was the end of the story. Deciding to throw myself on the mercy of the court, I arrived at the appointed place and time to discover that the clerk of the court was one of our church musicians. Ego in hand, I walked up to him and was able to laugh with him at my humanness prior to the beginning of the court session.

Over the course of my ministry, God has provided other opportunities for me to laugh with others. For example, sometimes we've laughed over my pulpit mannerisms. I'm sure you realize that children especially like to model what you say and do in the midst of worship. When the Holy Spirit gets hold of me, I sometimes spin around, and kids love to mimic this at home. They are surprised that I don't take offense. To the contrary, it opens a door for me to teach about ways the Holy Spirit can move through us.

Another interesting event happened last January when a seven-year-old boy told me that he needed to talk with me about my preaching. I wondered if he would critique my delivery. When I told him I was listening, he inquired, *Why did you say 'ass' this morning?* I couldn't remember using that word in my sermon, but did remember that our First Sunday liturgy includes repetition of all Ten Commandments including the prohibition from coveting our neighbor's ass. Trying to maintain a serious composure, I explained that ass in this context referred to an animal, not someone's behind. In our First Sunday ritual, we now use *donkey*, and those of us who know the inside story smile as we hear the new reading of the 10th commandment.

Sometimes I use humor as a way of gaining someone's attention. Even in ministry to the sick and depressed, appropriate humor can open people up to the hope God gives. As the Holy Spirit leads, I may share a funny story or make a funny comment just to get people to laugh. I always pray for God's leading prior to going to a sick room, and I have found that when God determines that laughter is good for one's healing, the Lord will give the proper words. Our time however, is always concluded with listening to their concerns, hearing the Word of God and prayer for healing and restoration.

When we lighten up a bit it also gives permission for others to find joy in the journey. At St. Stephens, for example, one particular woman comes to mind. Sometimes she'll share a funny situation just at the right time to lift the heaviness of a difficult congregational situation. She and others teach us to enjoy God's blessings and to enjoy each other.

So may God also bless you and your people, dear friend, with the freedom to enjoy good, clean laughter.

Reveling in the Lord,

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To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose
under heaven . . . a time to laugh.

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4a