

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, November 17, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **PROVERBS 17:22**

“A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.” (Revised Standard Version)

“Being cheerful keeps you healthy. It is slow death to be gloomy all the time.” (Good News Bible)

### **A GOOD MEDICINE**

You will recall that in last Sunday’s sermon I had a few words to say about 2 Corinthians 9:7 where Paul says, “The Lord loves a cheerful giver.” And since today we are going to present to the Lord our Faith Promises for 1992, I thought I would try to help you be a cheerful giver by preaching a cheerful sermon! And I have the ideal text. It is found in Proverbs 17:22:

“A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.” That is the Revised Standard Version translation. And I’m intrigued by the Good News Bible translation: “Being cheerful keeps you healthy. It is slow death to be gloomy all the time.”

This statement is approximately 3,000 years old, but it might have been written yesterday. The words are as up to date as this month’s New England Journal of Medicine.

**1. Of course, this ancient proverb means quite simply that the health of your body is partly determined by the nature of your emotional moods and your general outlook on life.**

A “cheerful heart,” or as we would say, a “sunny disposition” is a wonderful ally in the fight against disease. Its therapeutic value can never be disputed. A glad heart enables a patient to cooperate more completely with God’s healing power, but a broken or downcast spirit invariably retards recovery.

I’ve read that Sir William Osler, the renowned Canadian physician, was constantly writing cheery notes to sick children, telling them of the funny things he had seen at the zoo, or about the latest antics of the King of the Cats. And at night he would whisper in the nursery, “Blessings on you, children! Don’t be afraid; your doctor loves you and all will be well!” One adult wrote about this great doctor, “No human being ever left him disheartened.” And no wonder, for “a cheerful heart is a good medicine.”

**2. A happy mood is of incalculable value not only to the health of your body, but to your mental and spiritual health as well.** It contributes greatly to your general effectiveness and enjoyment of life, no matter what your vocation in life may be. Now I submit that this is a good

time to talk about the merry heart, because so many people today are having difficulty maintaining their lightheartedness. They are dejected, depressed, discouraged, and weighed down with the problems and heartaches of life. It is very easy just now to be sad and gloomy and morose. In this time of continuing economic recession, many people who have been secure in their employment for years now face the specter of unemployment as the workplace cuts back on personnel. And even those who are dispositionally cheerful have difficulty maintaining their cheerfulness these days.

So, most people need more lightheartedness, more laughter, more of a sense of humor. A sense of humor is oil for the rusting, creaking machinery of life, and people grow desperate without it. A happy spirit eases tension. It is more effective and a lot less expensive than tranquilizers. All of us are inclined in these days to become overly tense, and this stress is exacting a heavy toll. You and I were not made to live all the time under pressure, and if we do, ultimately something is bound to snap either in the body or in the mind.

So, a sense of humor keeps us from taking ourselves or life too seriously. It brings relaxation, and it keeps things in perspective. There is some truth in R. N. Benson's statement that God has given us a sense of humor to keep us from going mad!

Some years ago, a fleet of Air Force bombers made a nonstop trip around the world in record time. Dr. James Beardsley, who was on this flight, told afterwards how his bomber slowed down in order for a tanker plane to get in position above it. Now refueling in the air, I understand, is tricky business, and the crew of this bomber was very tense. But as the flying boom came down from the tanker and close to the bomber, tension vanished, because at the end of this flying boom was a sign which read, "We give S&H Green Stamps"! A cheerful heart is a good medicine indeed!

Now many of you bear heavy responsibilities and have to make important and far-reaching decisions. And this we cannot do well or for long unless we can see and enjoy the lighter side of life. You know, I'm sure, that in the dark days of the Civil War, President Lincoln was saved from despair and nervous collapse by his keen sense of humor. He was fond of amusing anecdotes and greatly enjoyed the humorous writings of Artemus Ward. Once, when particularly crucial and difficult decisions had to be made, and the Union cause seemed in jeopardy, Lincoln called a meeting of his Cabinet. When the men were seated, the President proceeded to read to them a chapter from Artemus Ward which he thought very funny, chuckling to himself as he read it. When he finished, he looked up to see a group of glum, uncomprehending faces. "Gentlemen," he said, "why don't you laugh? If I did not laugh under the strain that is upon me day and night, I would go mad. And you need this medicine as well as I."

Now life is indeed a serious business, and it should be so dealt with. We should not scoff at life, or treat it as a mere joke, but neither should we treat it as a calamity. Someone has suggested that we ought to take everything seriously, but nothing tragically, and that is good advice. Some people take themselves too seriously, and such individuals not only repel me, they frighten me. Beware the person who is always stern and solemn and funereal. He can be dangerous. His judgments are bound to be distorted because he cannot see life whole. We cannot forget that

Hitler and Mussolini were devoid of any real sense of humor. They were always pompous and pontifical, and resented anybody's humorous remarks about them. Their tragedy, and the tragedy of the world, was that they could not laugh at themselves.

So, a sense of humor enables one to sit loosely in the saddle of life. It helps you to conquer anxiety, and to bear up under misunderstanding and criticism. Henry Ward Beecher, that famous preacher of the last century, was frequently under attack because of his outspoken views on slavery and other social issues. One day he received an anonymous letter that contained just one word -- FOOL! He told his congregation about it the next Sunday, not to elicit their sympathy because he went on to say, "I have known many an instance of a man writing a letter and forgetting to sign his name; but this is the only instance I've known of a man signing his name and forgetting to write the letter!" Now what a wonderful way that is to face up to an irritating situation! You see, such a keen sense of humor keeps one from sinking into the quicksand of personal resentment and self-pity. If one does not have a cheerful heart, he cannot have serenity because inconsequential things will so easily upset him. A sense of humor is a sign of humility and maturity. Ethel Barrymore, the great actress, once said, "You grow up when you have your first good laugh at yourself!"

**3. Now let me go on to say something that's very obvious, and that is that it is a great mistake to assume that merriment has no place in Christian faith, and that the more deeply spiritual you are, the more solemn you ought to be.** So many people have it firmly fixed in their minds that Christians are a bunch of kill-joys, wet blankets, and somber-minded oddities, whereas vital Christian faith is an incomparable fountain of hope and happiness and real spiritual joy. "Be of good cheer," said Jesus, "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Someone once said to Thomas Carlyle that the world was soon going to come to an end, and Carlyle said, "Very well, we can get along without it!" "Rejoice in the Lord always," said Paul in prison, "and again I say Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

Now you know that our Lord possessed a cheerful heart and a lively sense of humor, and I think people make a grave mistake when they think of Him as long-faced and melancholy. Some of the stories Jesus told are genuinely funny. Of course, they were packed with meaning, but they were funny. You remember the story He told about the man who wanted to bestow his charity upon a beggar (see Matthew 6:1-4). But he also wanted everyone to know something of his generosity. So what did he do? He unslung a trumpet that he took along for such occasions, and he blew the trumpet until a crowd had gathered, and then he dropped his coin into the beggar's cup and passed on. Now I submit that the person who can't see humor in that is really strange! By the way, this is where we get our phrase, "Blowing your own horn."

T. R. Glover, in one of his books, calls attention to the humor in Jesus' story about the man who "strained a fly out of his drink, but swallowed a camel" (Matthew 23:24 -- Good News Bible). Listen to this! "How many of us," writes Dr. Glover, "have ever pictured the process and the series of sensations as the long, hairy neck slid down the throat of the Pharisee? All that amplitude of loose-hung anatomy: the hump, two humps, both of them slid down and he didn't know it! And the legs, all of them, with the whole outfit of knees and padded feet. The Pharisee swallowed the camel and never noticed it!" And yet, when some ministers stand in the pulpit and read the Bible they get so solemn, always solemn! I believe Jesus had a twinkle in His eye when

He told that story.

Now don't misunderstand me. Jesus was no jokester, to be sure. But neither was He sad and doleful. He had a quiet, keen sense of the ridiculous which, of course, is the most delightful form of humor. It is said by some people that Jesus never laughed. I don't believe it. Someone has said that the Bible tells us that "Jesus wept" on one occasion (John 11:35); and that is recorded because it was so unusual for Him to do that. Nothing could be more false to the character of our Lord than to portray Him as a grave and solemn Person always interfering with people's good times. Everywhere He went He carried with Him an atmosphere of charm and hope and good cheer. He was the life of the party. Said one writer, "When He appeared, the sun came out, and where He was, the brave green banners of Spring were flung out everywhere."

Mind you, I believe that humor should be used sparingly and with great skill in sermons. A minister of the Gospel is ruined as an effective evangelist when people think of him primarily as a clown. It has been wisely said that a sermon deals with the weightiest issues of life, and a pulpit is no place for buffoonery, and that is true. But I maintain that the right kind and the right amount of humor can enforce and illuminate great and serious truth, and it can refresh a congregation. There is a humorous side to many Scriptural passages, and it does the Bible no disservice to point them out. The Bible is above all a jubilant Book.

**4. Well, that leads me to say that our Christian faith is the supreme source of the cheerful heart.** A vital experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ is a veritable fountain of radiance and joy. The German poet Goethe charged that Christianity is a religion of sorrow, but you don't get that impression from reading the Bible. Now there is sadness within its pages, to be sure, but the dominant note of the Scriptures is one of gladness and triumph. There is Nehemiah's saying, "The joy of the Lord is your strength!" (8:10). And poor old Job, in the midst of his anguish, could still say, "God will fill your mouth with laughing, and your lips with rejoicing" (8:21). And on almost every page of the Psalms you find a man exulting, rejoicing exceedingly. Here is one I love, "In Thy presence is fullness of joy" -- of course, you must live close to the Lord to experience this joy -- "In Thy presence is fullness of joy; at Thy right hand are pleasures for evermore" (16:11, King James Version). Or this one -- "My soul shall be joyful in the Lord; it shall rejoice in His salvation" (35:9, KJV). And Isaiah, the prince of the prophets, writes, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall be joyful in my God" (61:10, KJV).

And when you leave the Old Testament and enter the New, the note of joy heightens. Says one writer, "The New Testament is the most joyful book in the world. It opens with joy over the birth of Jesus, and it ends with a superb picture of a multitude which no man can number singing the Hallelujah Chorus." No matter where you open the Bible, amid fortunate or discouraging circumstances, you always hear the note of joy. And people are still finding that instead of making them sad and gloomy, a vital faith in Christ is the chief source of true and abiding joy.

Now, my Christian brothers and sisters, I don't know whether you've ever thought about it, but is not a lack of cheerfulness really a lack of faith? Dr. Leslie D. Weatherhead wrote a book during the dark days of World War II in Great Britain which he entitled, This is the Victory and in that book he said this: "The opposite of joy is not sorrow, it is unbelief." And that is true. A downcast spirit signifies either that we do not believe in God, or that the God in Whom we

believe is too small, and we therefore have no one to manage for us except ourselves; and believe me, that would put anybody down in the dumps!

Let me say in conclusion -- if you and I do not have the cheerful heart, then we're missing something that God wants us to have, and which multitudes of people have experienced over the centuries. John Ruskin once said, "We are converted not to long and gloomy faces, but to round and happy ones." We ask God to forgive us our ugly faults and our evil tempers, and our bad behavior, and we should. But seldom if ever do we ask Him to forgive us for our dolefulness and pessimism and gloominess. Maybe we ought to do that too.

Mind you, I'm not discounting the fact that these are hard and testing times through which we're passing. But our faith in God, if it is genuine and thoroughgoing, established upon the Rock, Christ Jesus, can give us inner peace and outward radiance whatever the circumstances. And if we cannot rejoice in what we see in the world, we can, with Paul, rejoice in the Lord! "The fruit of the Spirit is... JOY" (Galatians 5:22).

Have you heard this delightful little poem? -

Oh, the sheer joy of it, living with Thee!  
God of the universe, Lord of a tree;  
Maker of mountains, Lover of me!

Oh, the sheer joy of it, walking with Thee!  
Out on the hilltop, down by the sea;  
Life is so wonderful, life is so free!

Oh, the sheer joy of it, working with God!  
Running His errands, waiting His nod;  
Building His Heaven on common sod!

You all remember the old Gospel hymn:

You can have the joybells ringing in your heart,  
And a peace that from you never will depart;  
Take the Savior here below with you everywhere you go;  
He will keep the joybells ringing in your heart.

If we don't have the joy, I wonder is it because we do not have Him? Is He really living in your heart?

"A cheerful heart is a good medicine!"

**AMEN.**