

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Laugh Therapy 3*

Good Medicine

May 7, 2023

Proverbs 17:22

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

The proverb...

Proverbs are a certain type of Biblical literature that we've defined, in days past, not so much as personal promises from God as they are short statements of wisdom about how God made the world to work that generally prove true.

Proverbs are principles that, if we're wise, we'll receive and live by, because they help align our lives with God's intentions.

Like this one: "*a cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*"

A cheerful heart—a spirit that embraces joy and hope and humor and knows how to laugh—brings health. A sour spirit—a bitter attitude—brings infirmity.

This is something, the writer says, that God wove into creation and that history generally proves to be true.

A mother, with a little boy in tow, rushed into an emergency room and cried, "Doctor, doctor! My son just swallowed a whole roll of film!"

The doctor replied, "Don't worry ma'am; he'll be fine. We'll just wait and see what develops."

Now, I realize, of course, that most under 25 totally missed that joke due to these. [hold up camera]

Here's one you'll appreciate:

The ER doctor asks the nurse, "How are things going with that kid in room 6 who swallowed the roll of quarters?"

The nurse replied, "Sorry doctor—no change yet."

Norman Cousins' story is well known, but I'll give you the abbreviated version.

Cousins was a mid-20th century Jewish-American political journalist, author, professor and peace advocate who long pursued research on the biochemistry of human emotions, believing that they were a key to successfully fighting illness.

In 1964, he got the chance to prove his theories personally.

While traveling overseas, he found himself too sick with pain and fever to continue with his work and had to fly home. Within just a few days, he could barely move his arms and legs, and testing diagnosed him as suffering from a crippling connective tissue disease—a collagen disease.

Collagen is the fibrous stuff that holds our cells together, so, as Cousins described it, "I was coming unstuck."

He immediately began studying medical literature and concluded he was suffering from adrenal exhaustion which had been brought on by tension.

Considering *negative* tension had caused his sickness, he wondered if *positive* thought could repair it.

So, he began experimenting on himself; he engineered a plan of laughter. He intentionally began to watch comedy shows, funny movies and to read funny stories that provoked him to laugh, and he found that ten minutes of deep laughter consistently brought him two hours of relief from pain.

He reported his findings to his doctors, who did sedimentation tests—measurements of the level of inflammation in the body. Those tests concluded that laughter episodes not only reduced sedimentation rates, the whole process brought cumulative benefit.

In other words, laughing was making him healthier.

Cousins wrote, "I was elated by the discovery that there absolutely is a physiological basis for the ancient assertion that laughter is good medicine."

He reports his struggle with that illness and his discovery of laugh therapy in his book, *Anatomy of an Illness*.

And, Cousins recovered from that disease.

Then, in 1980, while a professor at the UCLA school of medicine, Cousins suffered a massive heart attack which he fought with a variety of tools, including intentional positivity.

He did die of heart failure in 1990. He was 75 years old, but he survived years longer than his doctors predicted: 10 years after that heart attack, 26 years after his collagen illness, and 36 years after his doctors first diagnosed his heart disease.

"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."

An elderly man goes to his doctor for a checkup. After examining him and reviewing his lab work, the nurse tells him, "Everything is fine, especially for a person of your age."

"For my age?" asks the patient. "I'm only 70. Do you think I can make it to 80?"

"Well," said the nurse, "do you drink or smoke?"

"No," said the man.

"Do you eat lots of fats or sugar?"

"No," the patient replied. "I am very cautious about my diet."

"Do you engage in any high-risk behaviors like skiing or sky-diving?"

"Of course not! I always play it safe."

"Do you laugh a lot and like to have a good time?"

"No, I take life very seriously."

The nurse thought a moment and then said, "Well if that's the case, why in the world would you want to live to be 80?"

Now please know that all this about laughter and healing is in no way a knock against doctors or

medicines. Not at all. Neither this proverb, not my comments about it, are intended to ridicule antibiotics or explain the cause of leukemia.

This is not a magic potion that cures all sickness.

But there is real health value in a positive, light-hearted spirit. In fact, doctors have long observed that positive attitudes do help heal.

What Cousins really began was the documentation and intentional study by the medical profession of the changes that occur in the body that result from both pleasure and stress.

And, contrary to some who claim he simply laughed his way through his diseases, Cousins himself admits that laughter is a metaphor for the whole range of positive human emotions, which he lists as, "faith, hope, love, the will to live, cheer, humor, creativity, playfulness, confidence and expectation."

Do any of those sound Biblical to you?

And you know, ever since Cousins, the evidence that these emotions and states really do help heal has only increased.

As recently as March of this year, the American Medical Association reported the research finding that every organ in the body responds positively to laughter.¹

A 2021 article from the Mayo Clinic was titled "Stress Relief from Laughter? It's No Joke" and goes on to highlight a long list of laughter's short-term and long-term health benefits.²

Here's one you're not even going to believe. As Dave Barry says, "I am not making this up."

Just this past Friday – I'm not talking about 50 years ago, I'm talking *this past* Friday, I was on a Department of Veteran's Affairs website. This is a federal government website with a page entitled, "The Healing Benefits of Humor and Laughter," and just under that title were the words, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine," complete with the reference, Proverbs 17:22.³

A Bible verse on a government web site?

Obviously, somebody on the "political correct police force" is not doing their job.

Anyway, between that Scripture reference and the body of the article was this: "A patient walks into a clinic, terribly anxious. He approached the desk and said, "Nurse – please help me! I am shrinking! I am losing an inch of height every few minutes!"

"The nurse replied, "I'm sorry sir – the team is on their way to an emergency, so you're just going to have to be a little patient."

I could give examples from medical schools and institutions that would take us well into this afternoon.

I will not do that, because if I did, no amount of laughter would heal me from the injury I would sustain.

But the point is, modern medical science continues to prove what Solomon knew ages ago: "*A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*"

A woman accompanied her husband when he went for his annual checkup. Afterward, while he was getting dressed, the doctor slipped out and said to the wife, "You know, your husband – he does not look good to me."

The wife replied, "Well doctor, he doesn't look good to me either, but he is handy around the house."

Laughter as medicine. Have you tried it?

Our health really is affected by more than nutrition, exercise, genetics, environment, medications and sleep.

We affect it by our attitude and spirit.

How is your attitude, your spirit, your heart?

A cheerful heart or a broken spirit: that's our choice. They are not results of fate, temperament, genes, health or circumstance.

A person can choose to be cheerful even in the midst of horrible difficulty.

Just the same, the very best day can be ruined by a person who chooses to be morose.

As another proverb, Proverbs 15:15, says, "*We can have a continual feast through life, or we can find something wrong with every single day.*"

You see, the choice is ours.

Proverbs like these: they're not telling us to have a foolish or naïve approach to life.

They're telling us, rather, that God created us to receive natural blessings if we should choose joy – which is, I might add, actually a command to the follower of Jesus.

Philippians 4:4, the Apostle Paul writes, "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!*"

He said it twice because he knew we'd need to hear it twice.

Paul actually says it again, in First Thessalonians 5:16, that Christ followers should, "*Rejoice always.*"

He wrote these things because he knew personally – there is much about our lives and circumstances that we cannot control; but we *can* control *everything* about our *attitudes* toward our *circumstances*.

What Paul is saying – what Solomon is saying – and what medical science has documented is that, by God's design, choosing positive attitudes improves everything about us.

Why would we not want to do that?

Listen, if we allow things like envy, bitterness, resentment, unforgiveness and anger into our lives, not only are we lining ourselves up for the judgment of God, we are opening the door to serious health problems along the way.

And what's more, those ungodly thoughts won't stop. They create ruts in our spirit and just keep pursuing us. They'll keep us from sleep and from healthy lives and relationships.

¹ <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/population-care/why-older-adults-benefit-regular-doses-humor>

² <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-relief/art-20044456>

³ <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/healing-benefits-humor-laughter.asp>

But, if we choose to be joyful, loving, thankful, peaceful, praise-full and forgiving, we will find the blessing of God *and* a therapeutic balm for our bodies.

If we choose the joy of the Lord, we will have a constant reason to be cheerful, regardless of circumstances.

You say, "You don't know my life. My life is hard. Why should I choose joy and hope and love and faith? What reason do I have to laugh?"

I would say, "Why, the answer is right here on this table!" [gesture toward Communion Table]

Jesus came and lived and died for my sins and for yours, and in so doing, He's destroyed death—our greatest threat and enemy.

No matter what we face here in this broken world, we win for eternity—forever—with Jesus.

What more could anyone do to bring joy to our hearts and a bounce to our steps and a smile to our faces than to ensure a restored relationship with God that will last forever?

Jesus is our reason to laugh—and to receive all the medicine a heart of joy offers.

If you don't know Jesus, you can today—and receive His offer of peace with God.

If you do know Jesus, then, please, receive His joy.

Prayer:

We come to this table with every reason to rejoice, Lord. Help us to do that, and bring healing to us even as we do—as we gladly worship you for all you have done for us. Jesus, in your name we pray. Amen.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*, vv. 1, 4

Benediction:

We can't control our circumstances, but we can control how we respond to them.

How do you respond?

Here's a challenge: pay attention for a day or two or three to how much humor and laughter is in your life.

How many times do you have a good laugh? Is it enough?

How often do you help others to laugh?

Those you work with? Your friends? Your family members?

Are you around people who make you laugh?

Let's fill the prescription that Solomon is giving us here, and see all the good that happens in the days to come.