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NO MORE CHANCES

Knock-knock jokes. They're a big deal in the world of joke books. Amazon lists twenty pages of knock-knock book titles (that's about four hundred different books!). Children almost universally adore them—have you noticed?

I sort of get their appeal to little ones, but I've wondered what it is in particular about knock-knock jokes that gets kids giggling so quickly. Naturally, I Googled the question. Know what I learned online? Nothing. Not a single article popped up. So I'm doing a little musing of my own.

One reason for the strong appeal of this kind of humor, for sure, is that children just plain love to laugh. Everybody knows that. So they look for any excuse to laugh, and knock-knock jokes are a fast route to a good chuckle. Another reason might be the incredibly simple and repetitive structure of knock-knock jokes. Kids are

into repetition and form. Knock-knock jokes are easy to replicate and are as predictable as the taste of fast food.

And, so many of the punch lines are truly silly. And if there's one thing kids are about, it is silliness. Further, being able to tell a joke, even one that makes little sense, makes kids somehow feel a tad bit more grown up. It's like they enter a new level of maturity.

At the preschool where my wife, Diana, teaches, it is not uncommon to overhear kids telling each other knock-knock jokes. Invariably, they spin out into "jokes" that are neither funny nor intelligible. But the kids seem to laugh all the more.

At the age of four, Caleb is convinced he has mastered the art of comedy or, at the very least, knock-knock jokes. So he charmingly engaged his three-year-old sister Lucy in a knock-knock joke that went like this:

Caleb: Knock-knock! Lucy: Who's there?

Caleb's mother, Lynnette, informed us that this repetition went on approximately twenty-five times. At the twenty-sixth iteration of Caleb's knock-knock, Lucy stared him in the eye and declared, "No more chances!"

With that, she spun on her heel and left Caleb sputtering.

Have you ever done that? I'm not talking about the knock-knock joke that goes on forever—though most of us are probably guilty of that. I'm asking if you've ever told someone else, "No more chances!"

Maybe she failed you too many times. Maybe he forgot you too many times. Perhaps his words or thoughtless actions have hurt you one too many times. She has just not lived up to what she promised you and—just the opposite—disappointed you over and over. Whatever it is, you feel that a reasonable limit has been reached, so you have decided to pull the plug.

Hear me carefully. I'm not suggesting that if you're in an emotionally or physically abusive relationship you should continue being a punching bag. That's just wrong. You may well need to bring in professionals for your situation. I'm talking here about the more routine issues of offense that we all encounter (and cause ourselves).

Now clearly, the notion of repentance plays into this at a point. An apology is hollow—and useless—if there is no honest attempt at change. But what if that change is too slow for our taste? What if we have questions about the other person's sincerity? What then? Do we go down the path that Lucy took and declare, "No more chances"?

You probably know that Peter approached Jesus and said, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Perhaps Peter felt his offer of forgiving so often was generous. He may have been startled at Jesus’ response. “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt. 18:21, 22). Some versions translate the phrase as “seventy times seven.”

But whichever phrasing your Bible uses, if you follow the math you’ll better understand the Lord’s heart here. Clearly, Jesus is driving us to the truth that there is no limit, no statute of limitations on forgiveness. Christ will never deny us forgiveness. But let’s make sure we are not merely appropriating this grace for ourselves, lavishing its healing qualities only on ourselves. Forgiveness is the gift that keeps on giving—that you and I are to keep on giving. The wonder of forgiveness is that, having shared it with others, we are left with more of it than we ever had.

So when it comes to forgiveness, are you generous or stingy? Do you prefer Peter’s limited number of seven “forgivenesses”? Or do you easily migrate toward Jesus’ generous idea of unlimited forgiveness?

You never run out of chances with Jesus. He’s asked us to forgive the way He forgives. Do we?

There's another aspect to this willingness to forgive others that we dare not overlook. If we refuse to forgive others, we may also struggle with forgiving ourselves. These tendencies are often two sides of the same coin. But be warned.

We preach a heretical gospel of hopelessness and do the devil's hissing for him when we tell ourselves, *You've confessed that sin too many times. Obviously, you're not serious about it, or you wouldn't have to come back again and ask forgiveness. What kind of Christian are you, anyway? Shouldn't you be way beyond this sin?*

Such a conversation wrecks of sulfur because it comes straight from hell. And that's exactly where it belongs. Psalm 103:12 assures us, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." And notice the language of the familiar 1 John 1:9 promise: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (ESV).

Did you get that? He will cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness. Please observe that there are no exceptions, no exemptions in this verse. There is no fine print. No statute of limitations. Nothing there at all about "no more chances."

Knock-knock.

Who's there?

Jesus.

Jesus who?

Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He who assures us, "I—yes, I alone—will blot out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again" (see Heb. 13:8; Isa. 43:25 NLT).

Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

“ONE COOL DUDE”

Morning. Early morning. Everyone else was still politely snoring in the cabin nestled in the north woods of Wisconsin. It was too early for little ones to be up, but someone forgot to tell that to Emmalyn.

She had just turned two. And two-year-olds have an amazing capacity for getting up at the crack of dawn—or before. Only when you have tended babies and small children can you appreciate the heavy toll of extended sleep deprivation. It remains one of the great mysteries of toddlerhood. How is it these tots are able to fall sound asleep at a rock concert . . . yet be jolted awake by the sound of one twig touched by the beak of a robin? As any parent will testify, once those little ones are up, they’re up. No force on earth will coerce them back to sleep. A reasonably quiet truce is the best you can hope for.

Emmy’s mom, though, was also up that morning.

She'd just made a cup of hazelnut-chocolate coffee and was sitting on the deck overlooking West Spider Lake (apparently named for the tentacles of water that sprout outward). The fragrance of pine trees and the freshly ground, flavored beverage hung heavy on the scene.

Emmalyn invited herself out onto the deck. Helped herself up into her mother's lap. Cocooned in blankets, the two pondered the sounds of chatty birds busy in the thick spread of trees. The density and beauty of the pines in northern Wisconsin can hardly be overstated.

After a few moments of silence observing the immensity of all the green around them, Emmy had a question. "Mamma, did God make these trees?" Her mom, Rachel, replied, "He sure did!" Silence. A pause.

Then Emmy looked down at the blue waters of West Spider Lake. "Did God make that lake down there?" Again came Rachel's reply. "He sure did!" More silence. Another sip of hazelnut-chocolate coffee for Rachel.

At this point, Emmalyn looked down at the ground, mostly a mix of sand and grass. This she refers to as her sandbox, and she plays with it by the hour.

"Mamma, the sand here is so fun to play with. Did God make the sandbox for me?"

"He sure did!" There followed still another pause, then came a look on Emmalyn's face that suggested she

was in the middle of a deep thought. Snuggling tighter against her mother, she finally commented, "Wow, Mom, God sure is one cool dude!"

"He sure is!" agreed Rachel.

For refreshing candor and honesty, you can't do much better than a two-year-old! Emmalyn called it like she saw it. I love that story. However, at the same time, it triggers within me three cautions for us grown-ups.

Caution #1: Some of us never truly learn to see the grandeur of God. We claim we do, but we really don't. We'll occasionally notice an unusual sunrise or sunset. Or maybe we'll give God praise for a starry canopy on a clear night. But most of the wonder of our awesome God is simply left unseen, unnoticed.

We call a dandelion a weed and fail to find wonder at the way its cottony seeds are blown and scattered. We enjoy a summer night on a deck and never ponder how many cicadas it takes to make the racket we're hearing.

If created things are seen and handled as gifts of God and as mirrors of His glory, they need not be occasions of idolatry— if our delight in them is always also a delight in their Maker.

—JOHN PIPER

(By the way, the answer is, a whole lot less insects than you thought. The mating call of a single cicada can sound as loud as the stereo speakers in your car cranked up to full volume!)

We plant daylilies for ground cover and rarely pause to look deep inside their richly hued blooms or consider the architecture of these magnificent flowers.

We can hear a woodpecker and never bother to wonder why, with all that beak blasting, its brain doesn't get addled. See what I mean?

Many of us limit our definition of God's grandeur to the "big" things: seashores, deserts, full moons. But the majesty and glory of God are as evident on the back of a ladybug, or a helicopter maple seed, as they are in a climb up Mount Everest, a hike through the Redwoods, or a dive into the Great Barrier Reef.

We need to learn to see the grandeur of God. Notice one of the places where Emmalyn found it: something as common as sand. Could it be that you—like me—need to learn to see the glory of God in common things?

Caution #2: Some of us see the glory of God, but seldom give Him the praise. One of my secret tendencies is to judge television nature programs that go to great lengths to show us the magnificence of our planet's wonders in high definition but fail to mention the name

of God. I should not be surprised by this in our secular society. Yet often I am no different.

At home we enjoy the shade of a tall blue spruce in our front yard that I'm sure I haven't praised God for in a long time. I see it. I enjoy its beauty. I certainly benefit from its shade—but I don't give God the praise He deserves for this magnificent tree.

How dare we separate the Creator from His creation! How dare we consume the meal but not praise the chef! We are in a place of danger when we can love the creation but not the Creator.

Caution #3: Some of us need to grow up in our use of worship language, to learn to praise God respectfully. You and I are no longer two-year-olds. But some of us seem quite comfortable using language that does not befit the Almighty. Our casual Christian culture hasn't helped us here, either.

"God sure is one cool dude" is an entirely appropriate statement from a two-year-old. But too many of us adults assume a careless posture in the presence of our King. While it is true God is our Friend and our Father, He is also our Sovereign, our Supreme Majesty, and our Maker. We get comfortable being too comfortable with God. Reflect on the mood of these verses (all quoted from the ESV):

Isaiah 66:2—All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

Psalms 114:7—Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob.

Psalms 104:31–32—May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works, who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke!

Joel 3:16—The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake. But the LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.

There's a whole lot of trembling before God going on in these and many other passages in Scripture. But most of us don't even have a category for trembling before His grandeur in our worship. Maybe it's time we learned what it means to tremble and, in this way, express in a small way that huge sense of awe we feel in the presence of the Almighty.

I dare you to find a quiet corner and read some of these verses out loud to the Almighty. Ponder His otherness. Whisper His infiniteness. Invite Him to teach you to tremble.