



"Everything is funny as long as it is happening to somebody else."
—Will Rogers

04-Sep-26

'I Was Only Joking!'

People enjoy playing pranks on one another. They set someone up, make something seem true, and then have a little fun when others fall for it. Some cultivate the personality trait of "pulling someone's leg." They like "having a little joke," deliberately misstating something or deliberately misunderstanding.

At best, the goal is to create a little camaraderie. People may befriend others in a flirtatious way, frivol, wink, trifle, or tease—all intended as friendly gestures. Over time, behavior like this can become well-refined, practiced to the point where, with the right enunciation or seriousness, the perpetrator can convince someone of something absurd. Then, like fly-fishing, once they have them on the hook and reel them in, they gently release them, saying, "I was only joking!"

But what about [Proverbs 26:18-19](#)?

Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death,
Is the man who deceives his neighbor,
And says, "I was only joking!"

Over the years, this proverb has haunted me. It is a blunt truth. When we apply it to ourselves, we tend to justify ourselves as doing it the right way, so it must be targeting someone else. We need to dissect this proverb, starting with words and grammar.

Chiasm is a literary device involving a reversal or mirroring structure. It appears in numerous places in the Bible, like Psalm 64 or the entire book of Esther. Even Jesus' statement in [Matthew 19:30](#) is chiastic: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

E. W. Bullinger notes that besides chiasm, Scripture contains 216 other literary devices. One of them is *anastrophe*, which will help us strengthen our grip on [Proverbs 26:18-19](#). Anastrophe is present when the writer rearranges words from their natural order to create emphasis, rhythm, or stylistic effect. It is a good word to add to our personal lexicon.

For example, if we say failure is the greatest teacher, we may find it useful and memorable. But if Jedi Master Yoda says it, we really have something! "The greatest teacher, failure is." That word reversal is a perfect anastrophe. William Shakespeare follows in Yoda's footsteps in Hamlet: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." We still use this proverb today!

Anastrophe occurs throughout the Bible. Instead of saying in the [Beatitudes](#), "The [poor in spirit](#) are blessed," [Jesus](#) says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" ([Matthew 5:3](#)). By using anastrophe to put the word "blessed" in front of each Beatitude, the phrasing becomes a hammer on an anvil, accentuating the divine blessing.

[Proverbs 26:18-19](#) is all one sentence, which we will break into four parts:

- **Like a madman:** At first, this phrase appears to make the proverb about someone else, as we are not madmen. A madman is angry, aggressive, crazed, or has dark or devious intent, so it seems to warn us about others who act deranged. But we are already on the wrong track. "Madman" is *not* the subject of the sentence. This proverb uses anastrophe, moving the word "like" to the beginning.

Here is the sentence with "like a madman" in its normal place: "The man who deceives his neighbor and says, 'I was only joking!' is like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death." While the sentence loses its emphasis, the subject, "the man," is clearer and easier to relate to. It could well be us.

Further, [Proverbs 26:18-19](#) is a simile. When anastrophe and a simile are used together, linguists call it a "fronted simile." A regular simile follows the form of "A is like B," but a fronted simile reverses the phrase, "Like B is A," similar to a Yoda-ism. By inspiring a fronted simile here, [God](#) intends us to understand that the emphasis is on "madman."

- **Who throws firebrands, arrows, and death:** This is called a triplet, which adds emphasis and rhythm. A common writing principle, the Rule of Three, says that groups of three are the most satisfying and impactful for a reader: The Three Musketeers, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, the Three Blind Mice, or even Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. Three is the number of finality and judgment. There were three righteous patriarchs before the Flood, three annual festival seasons, and [three days and three nights](#) in the grave. Thus, this triplet is purposeful, as is the choice of words.

Throwing firebrands, arrows, and death seems overly dramatic for the topic. However, it is likely referring to how the prank feels to the "neighbor" rather than to the action itself. These objects represent chaos, pain, and destruction, and in this context, the madman is oblivious to the effect of his actions on his target. The madman may be deceitful, in which case we can attribute the results to his own selfishness. Or, he could be trying to be funny, so misunderstanding and confusion might distort his humor. In either case, the results are unknown—at best, momentarily entertaining, but more likely damaging, humiliating, or destructive.

- **Is the man who deceives his neighbor:** This phrase could refer to either accidental or deliberate deceit, but either way, it is breaking the

ninth commandment. There really is no excuse for the behavior, only [repentance](#).

While this phrase includes the word "neighbor," the general tone sounds unfriendly. It seems more like a neighbor who is not a friend, driven away by jokes, assumptions, or misunderstandings. They may not get the madman's humor or sarcasm. If he is actually trying to be friendly, they may not even realize it!

- **And says, "I was only joking!":** Using such a phrase is weaseling. It sounds as if the madman is trying to squirm out of a mistake. It would have been better if he had started with it to make his intention clear, but then he would have lost the element of surprise, right? Where is the fun in that? Nevertheless, the deceit and negative results remain. Why on earth would the victim believe anything he said after hearing this excuse?

There is a psychological phenomenon called the Cassandra Complex, referring to Cassandra, daughter of King Priam of Troy. In Greek mythology, the god Apollo curses her always to tell the truth, but no one will believe her. Such is the punishment—perpetual disbelief—meted out to an untrustworthy person. Trust is hard to build; it must be meticulously stacked block upon block, day after day. One misstep in trust, and all that building must begin again.

Even when one quickly and honestly says, "I was only joking!" the victim may still feel like a fool. If it happens often, the neighbor will expect deceit, the very definition of mistrust.

Commentators generally believe this proverb refers to someone who does something stupid and, upon realizing it, avoids an apology by making light of it or making it seem intentional, as if it were a tease. The solution would be to apologize and repent. But there is more to it. The proverb compares a person who does this to a madman, one who is careless, chaotic, and causes destruction or pain, even when it is accidental.

However, the proverb is actually less about physical pranks and more about our intent and taking responsibility for our actions. Remember, the subject of this proverb is a normal man, and his deceit may be intentional or unintentional. If our words or actions lead to "firebrands, arrows, and death," saying "I was only joking!" does not absolve us. The [sin](#) is still on our heads.

We may be familiar with some inadvertent historical examples of death and destruction. For instance, in 1170, King Henry II of England was frustrated with Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his church reforms. Out on a hunting trip with his knights, the king sarcastically grumbled, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" It was meant as dark humor, not a literal order. King Henry even said he was being sarcastic.

However, four of the knights interpreted his sarcasm as a royal directive and rode immediately to Canterbury Cathedral to do what they thought he wanted. They hacked Becket to death at the altar. His assassination shocked the Catholic world, sparking riots, excommunications, and a near-rebellion against Henry. The Pope took advantage of Becket's martyrdom to solidify authority over England, which lasted until Henry VIII, 360 years later.

Sarcasm, using irony to mock or convey contempt, is a form of humor that falls under this proverb. Like Henry II, we can say one thing for humorous effect while believing something else. But some people are so subtle with sarcasm that others believe their words, not understanding the underlying malicious criticism couched in a deceitful tone. Scripture often describes it as "slander," "reviling," or "backbiting," and its effects are often felt as "firebrands, arrows, and death."

This behavior does not please God, as [Proverbs 6:16-19](#) relates:

These six things the LORD hates,
Yes, seven are an abomination to Him:
A proud look,
A lying tongue,
Hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devises wicked plans,
Feet that are swift in running to evil,

*A false witness who speaks lies,
And one who sows discord among brethren.* (Emphasis ours.)

Four of these hateful things—the italicized lines—are produced by a madman who deceives his neighbor and says, "I was only joking!"

Playing pranks is considered a type of humor, but it is not something we should want to become skilled at. David writes in [Psalm 101:7](#), speaking for God, "He who works deceit shall not dwell within my house; he who tells lies shall not continue in my presence." When we see this behavior in our children, we should teach them how destructive it can be so that they will not engage in it again. If we see it among our brethren, a private word may be in order ([Matthew 18:15](#); [Galatians 6:1](#); [James 5:19-20](#)).

This proverb makes me flinch every time I read it. I do not intend to prank anyone anymore. What about you?

- James C. Stoertz

Church News & Special Announcements

James reports that his mother, **Shirley Price**, died this morning. Thank you for all your prayers on behalf of Shirley and her family.

29-Aug-26

New Transcripts

[**1834: Decide Now How You Will Respond!**](#)

Given by Martin G. Collins on 30-Aug-25

[**1890A: What You Think You Have Can Be Taken Away**](#)

Given by Clyde Finklea on 22-Aug-26

[**1890B: The Canaanite Woman's Faith**](#)

Given by Richard T. Ritenbaugh on 22-Aug-26

[1891A: How God Cares for Us](#)

Given by David F. Maas on 29-Aug-26

[1891B: Remember the Holy Sabbath](#)

Given by Ronny H. Graham on 29-Aug-26

[BS-TC09: The Commandments \(Part Nine\)](#)

Given by John W. Ritenbaugh on 21-Jan-89

[FT19-08s-PM: The Eighth Day \(2019\)](#)

Given by David C. Grabbe on 21-Oct-19

[FT25-08AMs: Lessons From the Eighth Day](#)

Given by David C. Grabbe on 14-Oct-25

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Witty Side of God's Inspiration](#)

by Martin G. Collins

The Bible contains myriad forms of humor, including God's own wry sense of humor and wit. Paradoxically, learning to laugh makes us see more seriously. The Bible contains many examples of subtle humor, including situation comedy, intoxication humor, picaresque humor, satiric humor and taunt songs, verbal irony, dramatic irony, name humor, incongruous situations, spontaneous shock, and subtle wit. Jesus Christ was a master of satire, word play, absurdity, irony, sarcasm, and exaggeration. Humor in the Bible reveals one dimension of God's personality.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Ninth Commandment](#)

by Martin G. Collins

A Bible study into the meaning of the Ninth Commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Featured Audio Schedule

Friday Night Bible Study

The next Bible Study (Friday 04-Sep-26) will be **Lazarus and the Rich Man**, given by **Richard T. Ritenbaugh**. The Bible Study will be featured on the [CGG homepage](#) from **6:00 pm Friday (EST)** and all day Saturday.

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our [Email Subscriptions page](#).
