# IT'S ONLY BANTER

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**Category:** Observations

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Teasing, banter, taking the mick and insulting one another are an integral part of British behaviour. It's one of the ways that we bond with one another. If you know someone well enough to tease or insult them, then it's a sign of affirmation. The thing is, it is not until you start to mix extensively with people from outside of the UK that you realise how peculiar this sort of behaviour is. In my experience, this sort of bonding by insult is common among Brits and Aussies but much less so elsewhere.

Another side of this behaviour is that many Brits find it very difficult to say anything positive about themselves. Self-depreciation is a value. From an early age we are encouraged not to get "ideas above our station" or to be "too big for our boots". I suspect that one reason that those who study in the British public schools do so well is that they are encouraged not to have these negative self-views that are a part of our society.

So why am I going on about this? The answer is simple, I think that this British tendency is harmful and it is an area which the Gospel needs to address. Let me give a few examples.

In cross-cultural situations (which, admittedly don't concern everyone) the British teasing/insult habit can easily be misunderstood as argument or hostility. On one occasion a European colleague came to me and encouraged me to pray for reconciliation with a friend because our behaviour showed that our relationship had broken down. We thought we'd had a great time, teasing and insulting each other! If you are a Brit and you are working with other nationalities, you have to reign this in.

More seriously, we are called to encourage one another and from time to time to admonish one another. Both of these require a high degree of honesty and trust. The thing is, it can be hard to switch from a teasing/banter mode to honest feedback (be that positive or negative). As a result, I think that we Brits are chronically bad at encouraging or rebuking one another. Everything is done through a light-hearted grid that disguises real intent. A further complication is that our inbuilt refusal to accept anything positive about ourselves mean that we actively brush off encouragement when it comes.

One of the things about light-hearted banter, is that it rings true. You only tease people about something that has some sort of factual basis and over time, what was intended as light hearted bonding can actually become destructive. Hearing the same thing over and over again, even it if it accompanied by a smile can be extremely discouraging and hurtful.

As Christians, we are are forgiven, reconciled and co-heirs with Jesus. We've undergone a massive transformation and understanding this can help us to live the sort of lives that God wants for us. However, if we constantly knock ourselves down (and yes, we still sin and fall short), we will struggle ever to live in a way that pleases God. We live up (or down) the the image we hold of ourselves.

I realise that I am writing in generalisations and that not all of this is true of all Brits. However, living and working in a cross-cultural situation has shown me that some of the things that I take for granted are actually toxic. We joke about the relentless positivity of Americans and it can be hard for Brits to take. But I have benefitted so much from the encouragement and positivity of friends from the US, while British humour has made me laugh, but it hasn't often helped me to grow.

If we are to grow as individuals and fellowships, we need to learn to deal with this issue, to recognise our identity in Christ and to encourage and strengthen one another without hiding ourselves behind a joke or a tease. No, we don't have to lose our sense of humour entirely, but we need to rethink how we use it.