

Here is an unusually interesting question I have received:

QUESTION:

During the time that the New Testament was being written, especially during Paul's time, did they have in society what we consider sarcasm? Sometimes certain sentences pop out to me as they could have meant them in a sarcastic tone. I know it is probably just me since I am a sarcastic person.

RESPONSE:

Now *that's* an interesting question that I, literally, have never been asked before! But it's something I've thought about a bit over the years, and I think the short answer to it is Yes.

Let me start by giving a definition of sarcasm. You can find various definitions just on the Internet, but the basic idea is that sarcasm is a form of humor that used irony in order to mock another.

It is difficult to identify sarcasm in ancient writings. In fact, as you've probably noticed, sometimes it's hard to know if someone is being sarcastic when they are speaking directly to our face! The way we typically detect sarcasm is by the context of the comment and the non-verbal signs given - the facial expression, for example, or the tone of voice used and the words orally emphasized. You have none of that for the writings of the New Testament - only a bit of information about context (inferred from the text itself) and no non-verbal signs. So we have to make reasonable guesses about what is sarcastic and what is not.

In my judgment there are passages, though, that appear to be employing sarcasm. I'll give one example from the words of Jesus and a couple from the writings of Paul.

The example from Jesus' words appears in the Sermon on the Mount, one of the places where Jesus appears to be making a humorous comment but that is somewhat biting toward the people he is referring it to. It's interesting how most people don't observe Jesus' humor, but there seems to be a good bit of it. (The classic study is Elton Trueblood, The Humor of Christ). One that I've always liked is a familiar phrase that people often don't realize is meant to be funny. It's right after Jesus says "Do not judge, so that you be not judged" (Matt. 7:1). And he gives the example "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but don't notice the log that is in yours?" (Matt 7:3).

To see why it's funny you have to actually think about it literally, someone with a tree trunk hanging from their eye objecting to someone else who has a tiny speck of wood in theirs. But it's not just funny, I think, but sarcastic, humor being used to scorn those who judge and accuse others for things that they themselves are far more guilty of. One can think of many, many examples in our world - for example, people in power moralistically attacking others for things they themselves do all the time.

With respect to Paul, scholars have long suggested that he employs sarcasm in his first letter to the Corinthians. Most readers don't see the verses in question as sarcastic because

they don't put them in the context of the entire letter and of what Paul is trying to emphasize. Paul is writing to the Corinthians in part because there were people in the church who believed that because they had received the spirit of God (when they placed their faith in Christ and were baptized) they were thereby exalted to a kind of heavenly status and were already ruling with Christ in the heavenly places. They thought they were superior to other people and had transcended the pain, suffering, and trivial matters here on earth. Paul couldn't disagree more.

He writes 1 Corinthians to tell them that they will indeed become glorified beings in the future. But it has not happened yet. It will only happen when Christ returns and his followers are transformed into glorious, immortal beings, no longer to experience pain and suffering and death (this is the point of the final main chapter, ch. 15). Paul's main point in 1 Corinthians is that it has not happened yet, and people who think it has are deceived and blind.

In the opening section of the letter (chs. 1-4) Paul emphasizes the point repeatedly. Life in Christ in the present age means suffering the way Christ himself did, it means following a crucified man and experiencing his fate, it means imitating the apostles of Christ who are poor, abused, and mistreated. It is not a glorified existence (yet), but a humble and painful one. Paul uses his own life as proof. On the earthly level it is a life of pain, misery, and abuse. And he's Christ's apostle!

And then, in the midst of this proof, he turns on his readers with what appears to be a sarcastic comment in which he reflects back to the Corinthians their own (false) claims about their current lives in Christ, in order to mock them "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings!" (4:8-9).

Most people misread these verses, thinking Paul really means it, that he's praising them for their exalted status. But that's just the opposite of what he's doing. He's actually ridiculing them for thinking that's the case. That much is clear from what he says next: "I wish you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!" He then talks about how the apostles of Christ - the very leaders of the Christian communities - are massively suffering (not reigning as kings!), under the sentence of death. But it is also clear from the context of the whole letter: those two verses are the opposite of what he maintains throughout the book. And so they are meant in a mocking, ironic tone, not as a statement of fact.

The other place Paul uses sarcasm is my favorite. He writes the letter to the Galatians in order to convince his gentile readers that they do **NOT** need to start following the practices of Judaism - such as circumcision and kosher food laws - in order to be followers of Christ, despite what some other missionaries who have come among them have insisted. These other missionaries were apparently themselves gentile converts to the faith, who claimed that to be true followers of the Jewish messiah, you have to become Jewish.

That meant not only avoiding ham and shellfish, etc., and observing the Sabbath, but also, for men, have surgery to become circumcised. Paul thinks this is absolutely wrong and completely contrary to the truth. Followers of Jesus do not need to become Jewish. Jesus saves both Jews and gentiles as they are. He, Paul himself, has been attacked by these other missionaries as preaching an incorrect message (by not emphasizing the ongoing importance of the Jewish law). And he counter-attacks by saying these other missionaries are cursed by God for preaching a false Gospel.

Then, near the end of the letter, he pulls out the sarcasm, in my favorite verse of the book.

“I wish those who unsettle you would be cut off” (Gal. 5:12). That last phrase could be taken two ways, and that’s probably intentional. It *could* mean “cut off” from God, or from the Christian community. Or it could mean physically. He wishes that when these false gentile missionaries themselves go into surgery to “become Jewish” the knife will slip. And so sometimes the verse is translated “I wish ... they would be castrated.”

Ouch.

If you are a member of the blog, you get five posts a week like this. If you are not a member, you don't! So why not join? It costs less than 50¢ per week, and every cent goes to charity!



[The Message of Jesus' Miracles](#)
[Jesus and His Miracles: Some Interesting Features](#)