

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Sarcasm

Some people, including missionaries, believe that sarcastic remarks are cute, get a laugh, and do no harm. For example, they find that the following one-liners may bring laughter from a group.

- You don't have an inferiority complex: you really are inferior.
- Whatever is eating you must really be suffering.
- Talk is cheap, but that's OK. You are too.
- What you lack in intelligence you make up for in stupidity.

Such remarks may get a laugh, but they may also do harm. *Webster's Dictionary Unabridged* defines sarcasm as "a taunting, sneering, cutting, or caustic remark." The dictionary notes that the word comes from the Greek "*sarkasmos* from *sarkazein*, to tear flesh like dogs, to speak bitterly, from *sarx* flesh." Rather than tearing physical flesh, such remarks may tear emotional "flesh." Such emotional wounds may take far longer to heal than physical wounds.

*Sarx* appears more than 150 times in the New Testament and is usually translated as "flesh" or "fleshly." However, in about 10 places it is translated differently, and in those places the King James Version translated it as "carnal." Since carnal is seldom used today, some translations use other words. For example, the New International Version translates it as follows.

- Romans 7:14. "We know that the law is spiritual but I am unspiritual (*sarx*), sold as a slave to sin."
- Romans 8:7. "The sinful (*sarx*) mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

- 1 Corinthians 3:3. You are still worldly (*sarx*). For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly (*sarx*)?

This use in the Bible does not mean that everyone who makes a sarcastic remark is worldly, unspiritual, or sinful; however, it does mean that one must be very careful because such remarks may do harm. Here are some ways they may do so, and some ways to prevent that.

## "Mean" Missionaries

Humor in another language is difficult to understand at best. Many times interpreters translate "jokes" as, "This guy just told a joke, and I don't have any idea what it is. Laugh heartily to make him feel good." Sarcastic remarks intended to be funny may be taken literally by nationals, as insulting and not as funny.

When nationals who know some English hear missionaries calling each other inferior, cheap, or stupid, they may think that they are insulting, mean, or cruel and lacking in respect for each other. If they do not pick up the changes in tone, they may think that such labels are acceptable for Christians.

These may be taken several ways, depending on who they hear using them.

- "They are the disrespectful ways Christians address each other"—If they are commonly used by people on a team.
- "They are the disrespectful ways that leaders address followers"—If they hear them from a leader.
- "They are the disrespectful ways spouses address each other"—If they hear both husbands and wives using them.

They may be confused as to how to reconcile the sarcastic remarks with Scripture

that says to be kind and encouraging to each other.

## "Misunderstood" Missionaries

Other missionary colleagues may misunderstand sarcastic remarks intended to be funny. This is especially true of multicultural teams which are becoming much more common. Even if everyone on the team speaks English, some people on the team are using English as a second language. The principle for those team members is the same as for the nationals, they may not understand that they were said in jest.

In addition, even missionaries who all speak English as their first language may not understand that the sarcastic remark is meant to be funny. In one case, one person on a team misunderstood that the leader was just kidding. She never said anything but kept it bottled up for nearly a whole year. Near the end of the year she exploded about the kind of comments her leader had made repeatedly, much to her leader's surprise.

This is most likely to occur when a missionary feels especially insecure about something. For example, the following remarks may be fine for someone who knows they are intelligent.

- Are you always this dumb or are you trying harder today?
- I don't know what makes you so dumb, but it really works.
- If you were twice as smart as you are now, you'd still be stupid.

However, such remarks could be devastating to people who have doubts about their intellectual ability. They might laugh outwardly but be crying on the inside, and no one would realize how much they hurt.

## "Milquetoast" Missionaries

Some of the other missionaries on the team may be uncomfortable with the sarcastic comments but say nothing.

- They may not want to cause relationship problems out of fear that the sarcastic remarks may increase.
- They may not want to cause dissension or awkwardness on a team that lives and works closely together.
- They may rationalize that this is just the way the person is and that he or she just will never change.
- They may decide that the remark is just a "picky" thing, not really a problem.

For whatever reason, these teammates say nothing, and the situation continues. This is especially likely if team leaders are the ones making the sarcastic remarks. Unfortunately, unless they are confronted, the situation is not likely to change, and some missionaries may leave the team because of the hurt.

## "Merciful" Missionaries

Still other missionaries may say nothing because they want to be good, loving, understanding, and merciful. They are not afraid to say something, but they are reluctant to confront the sarcastic missionary because confrontation seems to be unloving, almost unchristian.

These missionaries seem to think that being loving means never saying negative things or anything that shows disapproval. They want to say only positive things that show approval. Of course, nearly everyone wants to be merciful, but we must remember that God balances mercy and justice.

## “Misleading” Missionaries

Still other missionaries want to be liked and “laugh” at the sarcastic comments. When they do this, they reinforce the sarcastic behavior. Individuals making the remarks take this as a sign of approval, and are more likely to make the sarcastic remarks.

This means that the sarcastic individuals do not get appropriate feedback indicating that what they are doing may be hurting people. Silence gives consent, and laughter not only gives consent but also encourages the behavior.

## “Mending” Missionaries

Fortunately some missionaries realize that a good way to help reduce the sarcastic remarks is to talk with the person about such remarks. Unfortunately, most missionaries do not like to confront other missionaries and would rather put up with something that makes them very uncomfortable than confront a colleague. David Augsburg titled his book *Caring Enough to Confront*, emphasizing that confronting another person is a caring thing to do.

Ephesians 4-5 has several passages of Scripture relevant to confrontation.

- In Ephesians 4:15-16 Paul talks about “speaking the truth in love” so that we will all be joined together in him (Christ) so that Christ’s body “builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”
- In Ephesians 4:29 Paul warns about unwholesome talk and about saying “only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs.”

- In Ephesians Paul also warns about filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking “but instead let there be thanksgiving.”

Many other passages of Scripture also admonish us to encourage others.

- Genesis 50:21. Talking with his brothers who had sold him into slavery, Joseph “comforted them and spoke kindly to them.”
- In Isaiah 50:4 the prophet wanted to “know how to sustain with a word him who is weary.”
- In Colossians 4:5 Paul urged them to “let your speech always be gracious,” and in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, he said to “encourage one another and build each other up.”

Finally, sarcastic individuals can do two things that will help. First, they may stop using such remarks out of concern for making people stumble, either nationals or teammates. In 1 Corinthians 10:22, Paul urged us not to “cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God.”

Second, they may ask for feedback periodically to find out how others view them, making sure that what they are doing is not being misinterpreted. We all need people who care enough to tell us how we are viewed by others. This often occurs in accountability relationships, but any individual can ask another individual to do this relative to a specific issue, such as sarcastic remarks.

Again, just because people make some sarcastic remarks does not mean that they are evil. However, the individuals making the remarks, as well as teammates, must make sure that such remarks are not interfering with ministry to nationals who do not understand that they are meant to be humorous, not insulting. They also must make sure they are not misinterpreted as fact by colleagues.

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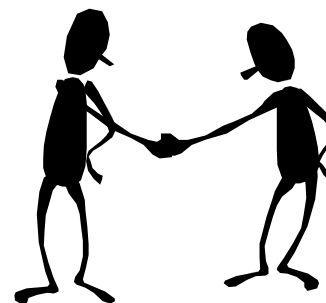
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