



## In Plain Words

### ***What model do insults and sarcasm in the Bible provide for us?***

To insult people is a somewhat precarious activity. For one sinner to have the temerity to criticise another seems presumptuous, and liable to do more harm than good. Therefore, it is not altogether surprising that one should hear praise, especially at funerals, that the subject “never said a bad word about anyone”. It reflects a sentiment which is not without merit, but there is also merit in Richard Baxter’s barbed comment: *“To do no harm is the praise of a stone, not of a man.”*

It is also commonly said that sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, and we must acknowledge that a sneering tone often illustrates well why Proverbs 17:14 was written: *“The beginning of strife is like releasing water; therefore stop contention before a quarrel starts.”*

Yet, for all that, biblical authors are not unwilling to criticise, and even insult and mock, those who deserve such treatment. In doing so, they occasionally resort to sarcasm.

This raises the issue for the Christian today: when is it appropriate to resort to the use of insults and sarcasm in confronting sinners with the truth claims of the living God? And in what spirit must it be done?

In the contest on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal, the prophet of God thought that a little indulgence in ridicule was appropriate. He mocked the prophets of Baal over the inactivity of their fertility god: *“Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened”* (1 Kings 18:27). Some Jewish exegetes even took the reference to being busy to mean “busy at the privy”. Whatever the case, these taunts spurred the prophets of Baal to more furious but fruitless activity (1 Kings 18:28).

Perhaps the chapter in the Old Testament which is most saturated with derision is Isaiah 44. Here God is pointing out the folly of idolatry. A man nurtures a tree, then finally cuts it down, for two uses.

*“Then it shall be for a man to burn, for he will take some of it and warm himself; yes, he kindles it and bakes bread; indeed he makes a god and worships it; he makes it a carved image, and falls down to it. He burns half of it in the fire; with this half he eats meat; he roasts a roast, and is satisfied. He even warms himself and says, ‘Ah! I am warm, I have seen the fire.’ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his carved image. He falls down before it and worships it, prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’”*

Isaiah 44:15-17

But Jeremiah 10 is almost as strong: *“For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good.”*

Jeremiah 10:3-5

The gods of the nations rank with fuel used for cooking! Sin is not only morally evil but intellectually absurd.

One of the most unforgettable insulting images used in the Old Testament is found in Amos' portrayal of the high society women of his day: *"Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountains of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring wine, let us drink.'"* (Amos 4:1). The picture is savagely drawn, but in every way appropriate. Such a heartless love of luxury called out for fierce denunciation, not a mild expression of disagreement.

Interestingly enough, Psalm 22 refers to the strong bulls of Bashan who had encircled the crucified one (Ps. 22:12).

One needs to be careful not to find irony and sarcasm where it is not. In Jeremiah 28 the false prophet Hananiah predicted that the Babylonian yoke would be broken in two years, not in 70 as Jeremiah had predicted in Jeremiah 25:11. Jeremiah responded: *"Amen! The Lord do so; the Lord perform your words which you have prophesied, to bring back the vessels of the Lord's house and all who were carried away captive, from Babylon to this place"* (Jer. 28:6).

R. K. Harrison considers that Jeremiah was being ironic, but J. A. Thompson is surely correct in taking it all as face value. Jeremiah prophesied doom, but he was not one who desired the woeful day (Jer. 17:16).

Christ himself was perfectly capable of sarcasm when the occasion demanded it. In Mark 7:9 he condemns the Pharisees for setting aside the clear word of God to maintain their pharisaic traditions. The gist of what he says is: "You are making a good job of rejecting the commandment of God..."

Something similar operates in John 4 where Jesus asks the Samaritan woman by the well at Sychar to call her husband and return. She replies that she has no husband, to which Christ responds: *"You have well said, 'I have no husband', for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly"* (Jn 4:17-18). Clearly, Jesus was raising the subject of her sinful life. By means of a half-truth, the woman was trying to evade his supernatural knowledge of her sins, but Jesus' gentle sarcasm made the divine scalpel all the more pointed.

Surely too Jesus was being sarcastic when he told the parable of the lost sheep against the scribes and Pharisees, and concluded with the words *"I say to you likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance"* (Lk 15:7). Calvin took at face value the reference to the 99 who need no repentance, and said it meant those who were genuinely converted, and so did not need to repent for the first time. More convincing is the view of William Hendriksen and J. C. Ryle who thought that the 99 referred to *"people who think themselves righteous and just, like the Pharisees, and fancy they need no repentance"*.

In Matthew 23 Christ unleashes an onslaught of withering invective against the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and distorted values. It no doubt hit its mark, and it is revealing that it also offends the inclusivist sensibilities of the arch-liberal Episcopalian bishop, John Shelby Spong, who, while claiming to be a Christian who loves the Bible, criticised Christ for being *"narrow-minded, vindictive, and even hypocritical"*.

Admittedly, Matthew 23 is not something to be repeated every Sunday morning, but it does reflect Christ's holy exasperation with the hardened unbelief of those who had seen more than to convince them that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Christ. As Spurgeon put it, *"he is not the most loving who speaks the smoothest words"*.

The slanging match between the Pharisees and the man born blind in John 9 is also revealing. Whereas the man's parents had capitulated meekly for fear of being put out of the synagogue (Jn 9:18-23), the man himself proves to be quite a lively debater who refuses to take a backward step.

Perceiving the corrupt motives of the Pharisees, he mocks the nation's religious leaders: *"Do you also want to become his disciples?"* (Jn 9:27). He was reviled for his trouble (v.28), as the Pharisees claimed to be Moses' disciples whereas they did not know where Jesus was from. This draws from the man born blind all his considerable powers of sarcasm: *"Why, this is a marvellous thing that you do not know where he is from; yet he has opened my eyes!"* (v.30). It was a fearless, if not altogether tactful, speech and it led to the man's removal from the synagogue, although our Lord then found him, and he came to saving faith in Christ (vv. 34-38).

On one occasion the disciples tried to engage in a little gentle irony at Christ's expense. When the woman with the issue of blood touched the hem of Christ's garment, Jesus asked who touched him (Mk 5:30). To his disciples, this was a silly question because there were people crowding all around him. They made their views known (Mk 5:31), but Jesus ignored them, and concentrated on the needs of the woman.

The apostle Paul too was capable of sarcasm and mockery when appropriate. He is none too gentle in Galatians 5:12, where he attacks those who were advocating a gospel of justification by faith in Christ plus circumcision. Paul's blood was boiling: *"As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!"* The KJV and NKJV, along with William Ramsay and J. B. Phillips, interpret Paul to be saying that he wishes that those who were troubling the Galatian Christians to cut themselves off, but the Greek text and the overall context favour the harsher reading.

Jerome offered the translation: *"Tell those who are disturbing you I would like to see the knife slip."* It is clear that the great apostle is being serious, but not literal.

Paul's Corinthian correspondence provides many other examples of the use of the studied insult or biting sarcasm. There is obvious irony in Paul's comparison between his estimation of himself and the Corinthians' estimation of themselves: *"You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us — and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonoured!"* (1 Cor. 4:8-10). The NIV has emphasised the sarcasm by inserting a "so" into the text: *"We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ!"*

Before the cross, the self-sufficient triumphalism of the Corinthians was totally out of place. Any biblical theology of glory must be derived from a theology of humiliation.

If anything, Paul is even more devastating in his sarcasm in 2 Corinthians 10:13 as he battles the false apostles who have sought to undo his work in Corinth. Paul was obviously reluctant to speak of his authority and thus appear to be boasting, but the activities of the false apostles left him no choice. Hence he writes: *"For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise"* (2 Cor. 10:12).

Later, he lampoons the Corinthians themselves: *"For you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise! For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face."* Then, in exasperation, Paul offers a mock apology: *"To our shame, I say that we were too weak for that"* (2 Cor. 11:19-21). Another example, though not all see it as sarcasm, is found in the next chapter: *"I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing."*

Down through the ages a number of Christians have spoken very vigorously, and indulged in sarcasm and invective, without always hitting the mark. One of the most obvious examples is Jerome, who lived from about 331 to 420. He possessed a deep need for friendship, but had a terrible capacity for falling out with those who were once his friends, and then attacking them in

most intemperate language. When his Latin translation of the Gospels was criticised, he claimed that this criticism came from *“asses with two legs”*.

When Jovinian tried to argue against some of the extremes of Christian asceticism, Jerome ridiculed his book as *“vomit which he has thrown up”*. Pelagius (a huge man) was attacked as a *“big, bloated Alpine dog”*. At times Jerome’s unbridled language embarrassed those who might have leaned to his side of the argument. It was his public and acrimonious dispute with his erstwhile friend Rufinus which led Jerome to new heights — or depths — in verbal abuse. He attacked Rufinus in every way: *“So great is your purity that the devils sniff noisily at your vests and underpants.”*

He continued to denounce *“the Scorpion”* and the *“Grunting Pig”* until 411 when, after Rufinus’ death, Jerome could breathe a sigh of relief: *“The many-headed Sea-serpent has at last ceased to hiss against me.”* Small wonder that Augustine could lament the fragility of human ties, and ask Jerome: *“Into whose breast can confiding love now pour itself without reserve?”*

Jerome specialised in zoological terms of abuse. There is no shortage of these in the Bible. Psalm 22 refers to bulls (v. 12), a lion (v. 13), and dogs (v. 16), as well as the lion’s mouth and the horns of the wild oxen (v. 21). John the Baptist condemns the Pharisees and Sadducees: *“Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”* (Mt. 3:7). In Matthew 23, Jesus declares God’s woe upon the scribes and Pharisees as *“blind guides who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel”* (v.24) and as *“serpents, brood of vipers”* (v.33). He once referred to Herod Antipas as *“that fox”* (Lk 13:32). Those who are outside the New Jerusalem are dogs (Rev. 22:15), while those who profess Christ and then fall away are likened to a dog which returns to its own vomit or a washed sow which then wallows in the mire (2 Pet. 2:22). The difference is that the Bible can be fierce, but, unlike Jerome at his worst, it is never mean-spirited and vain.

Martin Luther at times went beyond the bounds in his condemnation of his opponents. In 1545 he published his Depiction of the Papacy which consisted of nine illustrations, all of them coarse. In a graphic way, they were meant to depict the diabolical origins of the papacy and its supporters. It is probably best not to describe these illustrations but R. W. Scribner’s comment is fair and just: *“The reader who squirmed uncomfortably at the distastefulness of some of the imagery in his little work has probably got his message.”*

Luther was quite capable of delicate spiritual insight, remarkable common sense, and brutal and coarse invective, sometimes in the same work, and sometimes even on the same page. His *Table Talk* is especially full of this strange mixture of qualities.

Many years ago I taught English literature at a high school, and once had to work my way with a class of senior students through Evelyn Waugh’s marvellous little satiric work *The Loved One*. Set in California, the novel revolves around a pet cemetery and crematoria. At one stage, a Mr Heinkel is negotiating with Dennis Barlow of the *Happier Hunting Ground over Arthur*, his wife’s dead dog. Although the Heinkels are not religious, they would like a religious service, complete with the symbolic release of a white dove, for their deceased hound. Barlow offers further comfort: *“And every anniversary a card of remembrance is mailed without further charge. It reads: Your little Arthur is thinking of you in heaven today and wagging his tail.”* Heinkel responds: *“That’s a very beautiful thought, Mr Barlow.”*

One might have hoped that the satire was clear enough and savage enough, but, no, one sweet young 16-year-old looked up at me, and mooned: *“But it is a very beautiful thought.”* The triumph of sentimentality has made life difficult for satirists.

Whatever can be said about the Bible, it is certainly not bland. It is not afraid to engage in ridicule, sarcasm and insulting language whenever the occasion requires. But those who try to imitate its style in criticising people need to beware. Tertullian could be vigorous and humorous, but Jerome was often rude rather than barbed. Luther at his best was superb, but at his worst was embarrassing.

As the apostle Paul says: *“Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one”* (Col. 4:6). Salt is not the same as wit, but it is certainly not insipid. It stings and bites, but it also heals.

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