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SHOULD CHRISTIANS FEAR PROFANITIES?

by Richard Poupard

Recently I conversed with a friend who told me that his daughter had begun a job at a local coffee shop. He related that she enjoyed the company of fellow employees, who had been kind and welcoming, and she felt she would have opportunities to be a witness to Christ. However, he voiced concerns about the profanity many of the young employees used in her presence. She had been taught that using foul language was sinful, and their language made her uncomfortable. Hearing profanities at the coffee shop made this devoted Christian question her employment. It was this thought-provoking conversation that made me question the role and power that profanity has in our culture and our faith.

Christians are also understandably concerned about language that is allowed within their home. For instance, many stores sell a device called the "TVGuardian." This device allows viewers to watch DVD movies or TV by removing "bad words." The device does not change the visual content, but it mutes any word that is on a list of profanities. By eliminating certain words, an otherwise offensive movie can be transformed into one that is family friendly. Their website asks a provocative question: "What message does allowing an unprotected TV in your home send?"[1] Another filtering service released a video in which a family is pelted with more than seven hundred paint balls signifying their exposure to bad language. The video provocatively states, "Every word has impact."[2]

What power should hearing particular words have on the Christian believer? Can Christians keep their hearts clean by avoiding exposure to cuss words? I believe it

is wrong to flaunt our freedom in Christ to offend others intentionally with the language we use. However, should our fear of particular words keep us out of certain environments or relationships?

Just hearing certain words is seen as grossly immoral by many Christians. A mental list of bad words is made, and the Christian simply avoids those particular words, thus resulting in clean language. Many believe that this is effective in keeping the third commandment as well as the various commands in the New Testament against "unwholesome" or "filthy" speech. It would seem our speech is made clean merely by the substitution of a few words, regardless of the true message that our hearts are attempting to communicate via our words.

Profanity Is on the Rise

What is very clear is that use of public profanity is increasing at a high rate. For an example from popular music, at one point in 2011, three of the top ten songs on the Billboard pop chart had the F-word in their titles.[3] Television has changed also. In 1972, Comedian George Carlin famously listed the seven words that could not be spoken on television. Of those, only three remain taboo today. Simply avoiding the places in which we may encounter these words is becoming more difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, since millennials tend to use profanity more frequently, avoiding hearing these words may make it increasingly more difficult to reach that generation.[4]

Since we place an emphasis on particular words being "bad," we need to discern what characteristics define a bad word. Is there something intrinsically bad about certain words, or is the offensiveness of a certain word subjective? There is something about encountering a bad word that triggers an emotional response that "proper" language does not. However, words are mere combinations of sounds and letters. They do not have intrinsic meaning outside of the meaning that we give them. Is it possible, as author Jackie Sommers claims, that curse words are simply not all that unwholesome after all?[5]

What Makes a Word "Bad"?

Is it the definition or meaning of a word that determines its "badness?" Clearly not. In fact, I can use proper words such as "intercourse" and "excrement," but more concise four-letter words for the same concepts would not make it past our editors. We have empowered these four-letter words to possess some characteristic outside of their meaning that makes them forbidden. The term "expletive" initially defined a word that

did not add any meaning to a sentence. Since many bad words only add emotional punch to phrases, this term is frequently used today.[6]

If it's not the definition, then what is it that determines whether or not a word is profane? In short, we do. Our culture arbitrarily determines what words are considered bad, and that standard constantly changes over time. Words that are taboo in one generation become commonplace and inoffensive in another. When I was young in the 1970s, I rarely heard a four-letter word beginning with "f" in social situations, but unfortunately my ears frequently encountered offensive racial terms. My children experience the opposite. The frequency and the emotional impact of these words have been completely reversed in only one generation.

There are significant variations even among contemporary cultures that share a common language. An example of this was detailed in a recent book from the standpoint of an American pastor and his wife visiting Scotland.[7] After his English host drove them from the airport, the pastor noted a palpable tension in their conversation. Later, the English host explained that she was offended at the language that his wife used in their car, especially her use of the "f word." The situation was cleared up when it was revealed that the f word in question was actually the word "fanny." American parents often teach their young children to use the word, and it is even used as a woman's first name, but it has an offensive meaning in the U.K.

We see that profane words are culturally determined, deemed inappropriate independent of their meaning, constantly changing, and inconsistently evaluated even within a particular subculture. Yet some believe that clean speech can be achieved simply by avoiding these particular words at the time that they are considered bad. Is that what the Bible intends when it addresses language? For example, when Isaiah acknowledged before the Lord that he was a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips, did their nation simply have an issue with using too many bad words? Or was it something else inside of them that made their lips unclean?

Language and the Third Commandment

I was taught that taking the Lord's name in vain, as stated in the third commandment, essentially meant not using the actual name of the Lord in a sentence with one of the culturally defined bad words. It also was used to prohibit any profane words even if God was not mentioned. However, the concept of keeping God's name holy is more far-reaching than that. In his book The Law of Perfect Freedom, Michael Horton details many other ways in which we take God's name in vain.[8] God's name is synonymous with His reputation, and anything that we do to tarnish His reputation is a violation of this command. When we use God's name to justify our poor treatment of others, we

take His name in vain. Making a false claim about God unsupported by Scripture also disrespects this command. Not fulfilling an oath that one swore to in God's name is also a violation (and the origin of the term "swear word"). This command is far deeper than simply replacing God's name with "goodness" or "gosh."

We may also be guilty of violating this command in seemingly innocuous ways. Recently, when my young daughter sneezed, I reflexively exclaimed, "God bless you." A few moments later, I realized that I was not thinking or reflecting on God's holiness or my desire to have Him bless my daughter at the time. I was using the phrase essentially to say, "I am acknowledging your sneeze" without thinking about God at all. The words that came out of my mouth were clean ones, but did not reflect a true reverence for God.

It would be easier for us if we could follow God's third commandment by merely avoiding certain culturally defined words, but by doing so, we may miss an important point of God's holiness. God may care about the specific words that we use, but He cares far more about the heart from which those words originate.

Clean Words or Clean Hearts?

The New Testament gives many instructions about our speech. James 3 speaks about the difficulty of taming the tongue, calling it a "restless evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8b ESV). There are also a number of verses that are used as proof texts against profanity. Ephesians 4:29 speaks about allowing no "corrupting talk" to come from our mouths. Colossians 3:8 states that "obscene talk" is to be put to death as part of our old self. Were the biblical writers referring to specific bad words to avoid, or something deeper? Should we mainly be concerned with the specific words that we use, or is there something else that makes our speech unwholesome?

If Paul and James are referring to avoiding profanity in their epistles, we would need to assume that the churches that they were addressing were having problems with using culturally defined offensive terms. However, it appears that the poison that comes from our lips does not come from the individual words that are used, but the expression of contempt of others that emerges from our sinful hearts. The continuation of Ephesians 4:29 supports this. We should replace our "corrupting talk" with speech "that is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those that hear." Merely replacing bad words with socially acceptable ones is not enough; we need to adjust our speech to build others up to reveal God's grace in our lives. Likewise, Colossians 3:8 is sometimes translated as "abusive speech." Our speech, regardless of the individual words that are used, should never be used as a weapon to abuse or harm another.

Do Individual Words Have Spiritual Power?

Christian apologists correctly criticize those in the Word of Faith movement for believing that certain spoken words have special spiritual power. I am concerned that our reaction to profanity may lead to a false belief that individual words also have power over us, resulting in our avoiding individuals and places where such language is used. We speak of dropping "f-bombs" and dread the "impact" these words have, when we are actually the ones who endow these words with the power that we fear. When our concern about hearing individual words that our culture has deemed inappropriate drives us away from those we are trying to reach, we are disregarding our true role in this world. When we believe that we can sanitize speech and make it godly by substituting one four letter word for another that is more accepted, we don't understand the instruction concerning what should come out of our mouths. I can say very evil and hurtful things to another person made in God's image without using any offending words, and that is actually what makes my tongue poisonous.

In her memoir, author Addie Zierman details a tactic that she has used to help determine whether a Christian friend she is sharing with can truly empathize with her troubling experience. She intentionally uses a profane word as she begins to describe her pain. "Throw out a [expletive] and see if you get The Look. Watch to see if the person shifts uncomfortably or looks down at her hands...then you know: this is a Dangerous Christian. The kind that will not be able to handle the truth of your pain."[9] When we encounter anyone, fellow follower of Christ or nonbeliever, we should be sympathetically concerned with his or her life experiences, both good and painful. When our focus on the badness of the individual words that they use detracts from our empathy, we should seriously question our priorities.

In our own speech, we should be more attentive with the content that is flowing out of the abundance of our own hearts, and less fearful of the individual words used. We fool ourselves if we believe that we can sanitize what comes out of our mouths merely by avoiding or replacing certain words. Tearing down another human being made in God's image is an example of unwholesome and filthy speech, even if the individual words that are used are not profanities. We should stop being fearful of the experience of hearing so-called bad words, and refocus on representing the love of Christ to others—even if a few "f-bombs" are overheard in the process.

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NOTES

1 http://www.tvguardian.com/.

2 https://www.vidangel.com/.

3 Jon Pareles, "From CeeLo Green to Pink, Speaking the Unspeakable," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/16/arts/music/from-cee-lo-green-to-pink-speaking-the-unspeakable.html.

4 Melissa Mohr, *Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013).

5 Jackie Sommers, "More Thoughts on Profanity (and How ERP Therapy Changed My Writing)," Jackie Lea Sommers, February 5, 2014, http://jackieleasommers.com/2014/02/05/more-thoughts-on-profanity-how-erp-therapy-changed-my-writing/.

6 Mohr, 22–23.

7 E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 25–26.

8 Michael Scott Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom: Relating to God and Others through the Ten Commandments* (Chicago: Moody, 2004).

9 Addie Zierman, *When We Were on Fire: A Memoir of Consuming Faith, Tangled Love, and Starting Over* (New York: Convergent, 2013), 180.